

THE FRUIT OF ANXIOUS INTERCOURSE

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'Art' and 'Research' have been bedfellows for quite a few years now and very many of us have a vested interest not only in the respectability of this coupling but in the assertion that it can indeed happen (that it can be consummated). Like some people here I have been awarded a PhD on the basis of 'practice-based research' and like others I am currently supervising another such endeavour. The School where I work, like many of the institutions represented here, is spending and receiving money based upon the possibility of such unions. There is quite a lot at stake. And yet I would like to revisit the question of this intercourse between 'art' and 'research'.

In so doing it seems to me that my pun on sex is quite useful. What is first to be established is that 'it' can actually happen at all – even if their interest can be aroused, two parties may not be structurally compatible (between a mammal and a fish, for example, it simply is not going to be possible). And then if it is possible, and if interest can be aroused, there is the question of the fruitfulness such a union – is its progeny sterile or, worse, monstrous and species threatening.

So, Can Art and Research *Do It?*

Firstly, let us not reify the concept of 'research'. Research is simply a disciplined means of coming to know what we know. It is a *process* in which a question is clearly posed and a method of answering it is selected; evidence is collected; and that evidence is related to the question so as to draw conclusions. Research is simply a tightly organised system of investigation.

As I understand it, there are two over-arching models for research – quantitative and qualitative. In quantitative research (usually associated with the physical and biological sciences) a hypothesis is tested, results are based on observable, measurable data, and the researcher adheres to a strict research design developed *before* the research begins. In qualitative research (well established within the social sciences) the emphasis is on discovery and exploration rather than on hypothesis testing and the research strategy and structure is relatively open. That is, the researcher may have only a relatively vague sense of how exactly the question will be tackled and the research begins with ideas and assumptions that serve primarily to orient and sensitise the researcher to the issues to be addressed. Research within Fine Art is clearly unlikely to qualify as quantitative but, on the basis of the experience gained through my doctoral research, I will argue that qualitative approaches to research *are reflected* within Fine Art practices and *are applicable* within Fine Art *as* research. I will suggest that it is not that research models in other academic disciplines have not yet been particularly applicable to Fine Art but that the parallels between such research models and Fine Art practices have not yet been particularly *recognised*. Mapping this parallel will also present my perspective on what constitutes current research in Fine Art.

The art-making process begins with an initial idea or set of ideas, comparable to Beardsley's 'incept'. Something – be it verbal, visual, aural or whatever – strikes a chord or claims attention, although what is significant about it need not be particularly clear. What is important is a conviction that "...we can know more than we can tell"¹, a sense that exploring the thing/idea which struck a chord will prove fruitful.

This initial idea or gut feeling is manifest through actual making, or an equivalent manifestation. In other words, the resonance and meaning of the initial idea is visualised or made manifest through a range of material relations. And, once a set of ideas has been mapped onto a set of physical relations, adjusting the relations between the physical parts effects adjustments within the set of ideas. Thus, refinement of the initial idea is achieved through attending to, and playing with, relations within and between objects.

An important part of the art-making process is 'standing back and considering what has been made'. Such consideration generally focuses on three things:

¹ Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1967), p. 4.

1. The ways in which what has been made succeeds in manifesting its intended concerns,
2. The ways in which what has been made fails in manifesting its intended concerns, and
3. What is apparent in the work apart from its intended concerns.

The first two questions explore whether the intended dynamic is actually manifest in the work; can others see what you see. The third question explores the resonance of the work (of its materials, technique and form) in terms of its unintended yet emergent meanings and thus anticipates points of view other than one's own. In thus challenging the work *other* points of view are anticipated. Different viewers ask different questions of, or bring different interests to bear upon, the work and one's perception of the work may be re-structured by engaging with or adopting alternative points of view in relation to it.

This process, 'standing back and considering what has been made', generally reveals that there is more and less in the 'made thing' than was anticipated. That is, the made work frequently exceeds expectations in some respects and falls short of expectations in other respects. The ways in which the made work exceeds expectations is relevant to its concerns if it develops or inhibits them. Considering the made work's relevant excesses and shortcomings provides the basis for the next bout of making. Such re-making may involve minor or major adjustments or may involve starting afresh. After each bout of making its products are considered and the process of inquiry and clarification is repeated, thus developing the ideas being explored.

Eventually, the making-consideration-making dynamic must be brought to a halt and a decision taken to the effect that a 'made thing' can stand on its own as an 'artwork'. The apparent arbitrariness of this process may be defended by a comparison with procedures involved in equivalent 'scientific' decisions. Rewriting Karl Popper's argument concerning testing theories so that it applies to the making process – which simply involves substituting 'making process' for 'test' or 'test of a theory', and 'made thing' for 'basic statement' – yields the following²:

Original version

Every test of a theory... must stop at some basic statement or other which *decide to accept*. If we do not come to any decision, and do not accept some basic statement or other, then the test will have led nowhere. But considered from a logical point of view, the situation is never such that it compels us to stop at this particular basic statement rather than that, or else give up the test altogether. ...Thus if the test is to lead us anywhere, nothing remains but to stop at some point or other and say that we are satisfied for the time being.

Amended version

The making process must stop at some 'made thing' which we *decide to accept*. If we do not come to any decision, and do not accept some 'made thing' or other, then the 'making process' will have led nowhere. But considered from a logical point of view, the situation is never such that it compels us to stop at this particular 'made thing' rather than that, or else give up the 'making process' altogether. ...Thus if the 'making process' is to lead us anywhere, nothing remains but to stop at some point or other and say that we are satisfied for the time being.

This decision, to let a 'made thing' stand as an 'artwork', is taken if: the 'made thing' succeeds in manifesting its intended concerns, and hasn't yet been shown to fail in relation to its intended concerns. And, if what is evident in the 'made thing' apart from its intended concerns does not inhibit or overwhelm them.

As described above, art-making clearly *reflects* a qualitative model of research. 'Posing a question & selecting a method of answering it' (step 1) is equivalent to the artist's 'incept or initial idea'; 'collecting evidence' (step 2) is equivalent to 'making'; 'relating the evidence to the question so as to draw conclusions' (step 3) is equivalent to 'standing back and considering the made work'. Although in quantitative research the order of these three steps is strictly adhered to, in qualitative research the relationship between the 2nd and 3rd steps does reflect that within the art-making process. In qualitative research the relationship between theory (idea being explored) and research (making) is emergent so that investigation and testing of ideas may go on together.

² Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery* (London: Routledge, 1992; 1st ed., 1959), pp. 104-5.

I suggested above that qualitative approaches to research are reflected in Fine Art practices and are applicable within Fine Art *as* research. At this point, I wish to clearly differentiate between 'reflected in' and 'applicable within' – the latter is a stronger requirement and is involved in the difference between the practice of 'Fine Art' and the practice of 'Fine Art *as* research', specifically through to PhD level.

Demands are made of work that is submitted for a PhD that are not normally demanded of artwork; demands such as a clear and sharply focused presentation of its context and reflections, and coherence (this is a contextual difference relating to single-mindedness over a greater scale than usual). The first of these requirements entails, I believe, a written component within the research, preferably structured in such a way as to have an integral link between the thought processes in the studio practice and the thought processes in the reflection. If the structure of the interaction between the making and the written component is negotiated on the basis of the particular art-practice, then the 'words' penned alongside the artworks can function as a part of the artwork working. With regard to coherence, while it is generally the case that many of the ideas that arise in the course of art-making are set aside, art-making *as* research can exaggerate this streamlining (due to constraints of time and accountability). Thus, although engaging it as research does affect the art-making process, a qualitative approach to research *is* applicable within it.

Turning once more to the question of 'research models'. The expression 'research model' can be understood in two ways: as describing the actual structure employed by a researcher in a particular project, or (at a higher level) as entailing theoretical principles and a framework to guide how research is done in accordance with those principles. In the first sense, a simple transfer of models between disciplines and even between separate Fine Art projects is not feasible. As with syllogisms, if there is a particular premise, the conclusion must also be particular. Art-making is necessarily particular and each project engaged in will require the negotiation of a new approach. The second sense of 'research models' describes the quantitative and qualitative models of research, and as I have argued, the latter is reflected in, and applicable within, Fine Art.

So, 'Yes, they can *do it*', the relationship has been consummated long since and we *are*, indeed, all at it.

But What of The Fruit?

Given the relatively sudden and but quite dramatic increase in 'practice-based' research degrees over the last decade it seems to me that this is a rather important question. Is it fertile? Is it monstrous? Is it dangerous?

The intercourse between art and research generates all kinds of fruit and all kinds of anxiety about those fruits, and given our vested interests in this union which of its fruits hold our attention varies. What I would like to do is identify some of these anxious fruits and invite consideration of the fruit that *I* think is interesting.

A selection of fruit

Where the intercourse of 'art' and 'research' is negotiated in the context of an MPhil or a PhD it offers:

To *Arts Institutes* important fruit such as increased funding. Money can be drawn down to the School/College/Institute to support individual research projects; and the extent of such activity helps generate further research funding for the college or 'cluster'. At a less pragmatic but nonetheless important ideological and cultural level, this coupling of art and research is a gesture toward claiming equal status to traditional university disciplines.

To *Individuals* an opportunity to develop an aspect of one's practice and important support structures such as funding, critical attention and facilities. It also offers a certificate that currently gives an important advantage in looking for work within Arts Institutes. A Masters is frequently the minimum qualification required and a Doctorate is increasingly necessary. (I have serious reservations about this trend and while it is not the 'fruit' that I want to consider today I do think that it is vitally important that we think long and hard about it.)

To *'Art'* it offers another avenue for the generation and articulation of insights into the nature of the thinking that art involves – its rigour, criticality, fluidity, range, and so on. It also offers opportunities for relatively structured conversation with other disciplines. (The word 'conversation' is quite important here as it implies an exchange in which at least two frames of reference are at play and the demands of each are respected.)

On a more fearful note, this liaison may be poisonous and contribute to undermining the validity of art's own modes of thinking; implying that to be worthy of its place within higher education, art needs to improve itself. Furthermore, this liaison may corrupt the structures of art-thinking/making and its progeny may simply be 'bad' art.

To our understanding of *Research*? Well, in the light of the cultural power differential between 'art' and 'science' (the home of research) it is easy to see what 'art' has to gain from bedding 'research' and easy to name what might be anxiety provoking for 'research'. The linking of 'art' and 'research' may lead to a dilution of the rigour of its methodologies, it may generate unreliable knowledge-claims, and it may thus contribute to a general debasement of the term 'research' (increasingly meaningless through being applied to far too many activities).

Rather than move straight into exploring what I think 'research' stands to gain from this intercourse with 'art' I would like to harness the sense of anxiety for both parties to this exchange, invoke their difference, and wonder again at what it means to couple these two activities.

Particular fruits – a question of difference and 'why' revisited

In forging a sustained engagement between art-practice and research-practice a question arises as to how their differences are to be negotiated. There is the impulse to have the constraints of research suppressed in favour of a straightforward continuation of an art practice, thus using the label 'research' as a flag of convenience in academia. Or there is the risk that in the effort to prove itself worthy of its place in academia the demands and constraints of art practice end up being suppressed in favour of the methodologies of research. Both of these are possibilities within the field of an engagement between art and research and there are other possibilities, each one an individual negotiation.

In inviting some reflection upon such negotiations I would like to invoke Derrida's notion of *différance* and to suggest that each reconciliation that is negotiated between these two modes of thinking suppresses something of one practice and/or the other. What strikes me as important is not figuring out what might be the 'best' reconciliation but simply paying attention in each case to what happens to their difference and to the different kinds of practices spawned by the intercourse.

To ground this invitation to reflection I thought that I might offer a vignette of my own negotiation of an intercourse between art and research, both within the context of my doctorate and subsequently; a first and second generation 'practice-based research.'

Within my doctoral research I sought to initiate a dialogue between art-making and philosophy (a discipline with a research tradition). As used by David Bohm, 'dialogue' suggests a *stream of meaning* flowing through and between the participants. Thus, I sought to have a stream of meaning flow through and between art-making and philosophy. The loose union implied by 'through' was achieved within the research by using each discipline, art-making and philosophy, to investigate 'responsibility for meaning'. That is, each proceeded discretely to explore the same concern. Thus, the question of responsibility for meaning was considered through sculptural making and through study of the relevant aspects of a particular philosopher's writings and the critical response to them. Once these two disciplines were independently established, the interaction implied by 'between' was achieved by each discipline providing a basis for investigating the other's contribution. Insights gained from art-making were brought to bear upon unresolved issues within the philosopher's position and the cognitive contribution made by art-making (how the artwork worked) was explored.

The research generated two overlapping series of sculptures and within the overall research project unresolved questions within the philosophical position examined were addressed through analysis of the artworks.

The first series of sculptures, *Responsibility*, evolved as an exploration of the question of 'our responsibility for meaning'; the notion that the world we see is in significant measure determined by our expectations. In approaching the art-making this concept was signified by the word-pair 'restrainer/restrained.' The idea was that while a given situation is concrete, what is conceived as restrainer and what is conceived as restrained within that situation involves a significant

element of choice. 'Restrainer/restrained' thus alluded to an individual's responsibility for meaning - for how she or he frames a given situation - and it has immediate physical connotations. Physically, 'restrainer/restrained' suggests an approach to manipulating materials that involves high levels of engagement between parts and that explores the physical opposition between parts in terms of reciprocal 'restrainer' and 'restrained' roles.

The reciprocity of the 'restrainer/restrained' dynamics within the first set of sculptures explored the interdependence of expectation and perception, and thus our ultimate responsibility for the meanings ascribed to, and in, the world. Indeed, the work's exploration of the multiple meanings of a given interaction did not rest within its loosely existential framework. A wealth of readings arose in relation to the sculptures - readings concerned with movement, tensegrity structures in engineering, social issues to do with labour and gender, sociological/anthropological symbolism, and zoological/topographic morphism.

Of the multiple discontinuous and irreducible meanings anchored by artworks the one that lay closest to my interests was that concerned with movement. Movement involves change in position. However, as was established by Newton, 'movement' is a relative rather than an absolute phenomenon. In view of this I decided to explore the idea of movement through further art-making. The second series of sculptures, *Translating Movement* emerged from a particular sculpture within the first series, *Tetrahedral Columns*, which thus belonged to both series. In so doing, my interest was in the perception of movement - in how 'we' make, or complete the inference of, movement - rather than in how to make things move or how things move. The work is dynamic rather than kinetic, creating the illusion of movement and the impression of internal tensions and stresses.

After completing my doctorate there was a period of recovery and 'publishing' - giving papers at conferences and publishing in journals - and a halting return to making. I knew what I wanted to explore or think about but finding a way forward was slow. The work was fiercely reluctant to leave the wall. I did research, worked in my notebook and on worksheets on the wall and found that what excited me was often the connection between ideas but I just couldn't get the work to take a shape that I was happy with. Consequently I went through a long period of agonising about 'what am I' - a writer or an artist? - that only resolved itself after I secured an officially recognised studio that allowed me to face the possibility that the answer might be 'a writer'. In fact, that is not the answer I came to, but facing the possibility was liberating. The answer or feeling that finally emerged was that it didn't actually matter; I needn't name what I am or even what I do. That to say that I am 'professionally confused' would do nicely. I would just keep going and let 'what I am' and 'where the work belongs' emerge.

One of the things that emerged during this time was a piece called *Guessing* (see figure 17). I was invited to think about the relationship between art and science in the context of an exhibition. One of the worksheets in my studio was collecting images and thoughts in relation to notions of 'order' - implicate order, reason, and so on - and I decided to also revisit an article that I had published in *Leonardo* (a journal of art, science and technology published by MIT Press)³.

What emerged was this funny piece of writing that doesn't properly belong anywhere (or such is my fear, see figure b). It is not visual art, although its visual and thingly qualities are important to me. It is not philosophy although its concerns fall into that domain. It is not poetry, although its concern for language has something of this in it (I hope).

The next 'piece' to begin to emerge is a project that I am working on at the moment, *Babel*. It was born of the agony of making sense within a fabulously 'proper' studio and the serendipity of a lovely exhibition of paintings with a catalogue of poems in the same building entitled 'After Babel'.

Babel is about the struggle to make meaning. It is about confusion - what it is to arrive into a studio to 'mean some meaning' but which meaning, there is a certain arbitrariness in the meanings we make. It is about conversation, about trying to find a way of describing what is shared in meaning making. It is about incompleteness, about the fact that meaning is never achieved, it is always in the process of being made and that process is unending. The work plays with these ideas and the connections between them, and in so doing draws on the structure of the Talmud, the Jewish Book of Law in which the meaning of a central text is contested in the surrounding passages. (There is a particularly beautiful

³ 'An Exploration of How Objectivity is Practiced in Art', in *Leonardo* 33, No. 4 (2000): 267-274.

version of this book from 1524/5 to be seen in Marsh's Library here in Dublin.) For me what matters is not the content but the way in which the constructedness of meaning is played out on the page.

Again what seems to be emerging is a thingly writing. And yet I am not sure how it will 'be' in the end. And I certainly don't know where it belongs.

For the moment the Greek root of poetry, *poesis*, which means making, offers me something to hold on to: it is poesis, a making.

So – what sense is to be made of this evolving practice? What happened in the first intercourse between art and research? And what is happening in the second?

The first is a cautious intercourse that endeavours to draw out and stick to common ground. The artmaking accepted some constraints in terms of focus and the paths down which the art might have wandered through the questions asked of it were curtailed within the context of the overall project. 'Research' accepted a greater embrace of subjectivity than usual. The kind of thinking that emerged is very much a dialogue, a meeting of two distinct modes. The main insight to be established was art's authority in speaking to another discipline about its issues. And while the intercourse was an anxious one for me and for other people, its fruits were not overly so. There is a recognisable body of sculpture and a recognisable academic thesis.

While some of the anxiety attendant upon the intercourse of art and research may have been allayed during the foreplay of the second date, its fruits are possibly more monstrous – from the point of view of both art and research. This intercourse is not particularly respectful of difference. I wonder why am I doing this to art? Why am I doing this to research?

At the moment my answer is that I am doing this because while I love its modes of enquiry I have a difficulty with how voice is exercised in 'research' and I have a desire to see what happens when some of art's processes are played out through its structures. This is an 'art writing', an enquiry into meaning that seeks to reveal its own constructedness, to bring writing closer to the condition of art. It is a research process that through its manifestation questions the authoritative voice of research; that seeks to hold open the question of meaning rather than come to some, even temporarily held, position. It is reinstating that accident of juxtaposition and the subjectivity of voice and perspective at the heart of a careful research process. Not only in what it says but also in how it attempts to say it. As a consequence the concept of 'art' is stretched and I don't yet know whether the transgression is supportable. Is it art? Is it research? I don't know – it is poesis, a making, just like art, poetry and research.

To return very briefly then to the question of what I think that its engagement with art has to offer research – I think that it has important things to offer, one of which is the challenge it offers to a Western tendency to reify 'research' and its methodologies and enlist them in support of a monological and oppressive conception of truth.

So, What Is the Fruit of this Anxious Intercourse?

Northrop Frye suggests that offering answers is not such a good thing to do because it allows our thinking to settle on a particular level rather than pushing it to continue its quest, to remain inquisitive. I am not going to try and give a definitive answer to the question of what fruit the anxious intercourse between art and research might yield not only because I don't think that I know the answer but also because what I would like is that we approach the question in a way that is continually restless. Thus, I am not suggesting that a practice such as mine reveals the direction in which the possibilities of the monstrous thinking that is practice-based research lie. In inviting you to re-visit the question 'why bring art and research together' in terms of such possibilities and where they might lead us, what is exciting and important is exploring the question and being informed by it in our continuing pursuit of practice-based researches.