

Writing on Writing: approaching the creative exegesis as an embodied and co-dependent element of praxis.

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These notes touch on exegetical writing for the visual artist, a daunting task for many, myself included. The production of artworks are an established form of expression within the academic research field, but it is the supporting exegesis that helps contextualise and position this practice, and one that seems to cause much angst for those who see art as “speaking for itself”. Learning the craft of supportive and interactive writing as an academic exercise helps the artist become more self critical and reflexive, and teaches skills that will be useful later as part of your professional praxis.

Firstly I should state that I trained as a visual artist, and I have maintained my professional practice through regular exhibitions and publications alongside my involvement in the academic world as a teacher and researcher. Research in my case has involved everything from creative practice through to scientific research into non-toxic print technologies for use in the remote desert regions of WA. As I age, I have become more aware of the power of collaborative practices in forging new ideas that are often unattainable through an isolated and singular studio practice. I recommend collaborative research and practice to anyone who is interested in new knowledge that is frighteningly unpredictable, extremely confronting and more often than not, totally life changing.

My experience in creative research includes the often-conflicted domain of reflexive writing. I say conflicted because the various models and approaches to the creative exegesis are still evolving in Australian Universities, many of which are attempting various states of equivalence within the traditional thesis model as developed by the STEM disciplines. Evolution however is not a bad space to be in as new models are constantly being developed and the boundaries between reflexive and analytical writing are constantly being challenged. Art after all is not science and creativity is not the sole domain of the artist, so it is just a matter of time before alternative approaches to research and creativity assume their own voice and not as a variation of others. As creative artists and HDR students, you will make a significant contribution to this change.

My particular position demands that writing, in whatever incarnation, should form a co-dependent and contributory component of the creative work, and at best should involve dialogue across the practical and theoretical aspects of the total thesis as a formation of *praxis*. Praxis therefore “is a way of framing and qualifying the relational elements of creative research as a means of decision making and meaning making” (Crouch 2007, 112). The relational aspects of my creative research in terms of text and artworks and how they interact make reference to Andre Breton’s (1986) commentary on the privileging of language over imagery. Much early Surrealist debate focused on the primacy of word over image or image over word (Macleod and Holdridge 2001, 38). Breton’s attempts to resolve “the dualism of perception and representation” (1986, 94) led to new types of artistic practices and, perhaps more importantly, a new way of thinking. In line with this, the exegesis plays an important role in both framing and discussing artistic practice but also as a creative process to inform and develop new meaning. The exegesis therefore should aim higher than mere documentation of studio

practice; it should propose new experimentation and new ways of thinking in the uncharted spaces *between* written and visual languages.

For this to happen, the writing must be approached alongside and in parallel to the experimentation with methods and materials and the formation of art works, in order to create an ongoing dialogue where contextual history and theory informs practice and vice versa. Bourdieu contends that because knowledge about the condition of production usually comes *after the fact*, the finished product can often conceal the *modus operandi* (as cited by Barrett and Bolt 2014, 4). While knowledge can also derive from process of making while it is happening, the pitfalls in exegetical writing often surface where this relationship becomes too imbalanced, particularly when the creative practice becomes a visual illustration of theory rather than a two-way push and pull. Material language is often misunderstood and undervalued within the broader academic domain, so a thorough explanation of material thinking is essential in developing your praxis (see Paul Carter's *Material Thinking*, 2004).

As a practice-led researcher I use a "multi-method technique tailored to the individual project" (Gray & Pirie, 1995) where tacit knowledge, innovation, subjectivity, risk, experiment and practice are embedded in the process of creation. As Andrew McNamara states, "Good PLR [practice-led research] is a complicated affair necessitating a complex back and forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework of articulation" (2012, 8). Reflexivity, in my case, "goes behind immediate qualities, for it is interested in relations" (Dewey 1934, 293) between cultural positions and between theory and practice, offering up opportunities for contributions to new knowledge gained through the sharing and dissemination of insights as a result of the creative research. It is the *in-between* spaces of existing knowledge I find most interesting in terms of potential for creative activity. Therefore, reading and critiquing between the lines is often more fruitful for the artist than accepting existing knowledge as a basis for thematic jump-off points. This approach, when extended beyond texts to images and objects help form both a critical and aesthetic position early in the research, both within and across languages.

Within this approach I align with what Estelle Barrett terms exegesis as "meme" (2007, 159–163) as a vehicle to "fix ideas in our collective consciousness" (160) through an interdependent process of practice and writing. This is particularly important in the construction of a narrative practice by which "significant moments in the process of unfolding and revealing" (Bolt 2007, 60) are part of story telling, and best told through an embodiment of writing and making. In the spirit of the exegesis-as-meme model, the exegesis in total proposes "an alternative mode of understanding the world" (2007, 60) through which artworks, including my own, can be interpreted and communicated. As Bolt suggests, "The task of the creative exegesis is to extend on existing domains of knowledge through its reflection on those shocking realisations that occur in practice" (2007, 34). These realisations often rely on serendipity and chance, the often-unexplainable elements of creativity that define creative practice as distinct from science. In the context of my research methodology, Gray and Pirie's discussion of the value and legitimacy of serendipitous action within humanistic research is pertinent. They state:

The 'interdisciplinary' nature of the research supports a range of research strategies, which are multi-method in approach, rigorous, open, transparent and accessible. This indicates a move from scientific positivistic models of research towards humanistic models

based upon new intellectual paradigms (i.e. the complexity and randomness of chaos theory) and must consider the ontological (knowable in art) and epistemological (relationships of enquirer to knowledge) issues, which are adaptive and reflective acknowledging the 'impact of serendipity'. (Cited in Adams, 2008, 26)

In my case, my art works are invariably unpredictable and purposely suggest a state of the unfinished. The meme approach as a *connected exegesis* therefore serves to reflect this state of flux in its acknowledgement of insufficiencies in avoiding resolution in the scientific sense.

Bourdieu's epistemic reflexivity¹ underpins his claims to provide distinctive and scientific knowledge of the social world (cited in Maton 2003, 52). My approach to engaging actively in and reflecting current social issues, together with the adoption of transcultural collaborative practices, serves to oppose Claude Bernard's polarising statement "Art is I; Science is We" (cited by Maton 2003, 53). The boundaries between science and art I would suggest, are not as distinct as Bernard makes out, but it is the responsibility of the artist to explain as succinctly as possible, the contexts, methods, decisions and responses that contribute to the formation of a mature and informed praxis in whatever language that is most appropriate. Within the exegesis, the artist should not in my mind force a single writing style. The various chapters may demand shifts in style that help accommodate the various components of the creative praxis. These often include descriptive, poetic, reflexive, analytical, contextual and narrative approaches to writing, best accommodated by clearly defining your approach as a prelude to each of the chapters so that the examiner understands your intentions. Neither is it important to appear to resolve what often is unresolvable, rather it is better to be reflexive about mistakes and disasters that inevitably happen in your practice as an essential component of the process of creativity.

As an experienced artist and academic, my approach involves an autobiographical model that helps contextualise my practice within historical and cultural paradigms as a form of "constant analysis of both my lived experiences as well as my theoretical and methodological assumptions" (Ryan 2005, 2). My approach to writing reflects a similar process to my visual practice—that of an open-ended narrative that develops a position of holistic reflexivity² (Bleakley 2006) in its commentary on the relationships between the aesthetic and ethical considerations that form my critically reflexive position as an artist. In this respect, when studying cultural groups there are useful models of auto-ethnographic writing that avoid the pitfalls of othering or in the case of ones own practice, self-indulgent writing. Good auto-ethnographical writing facilitates the artist to partake in dialogue from *within* the subject, as opposed to critiquing from a distance. The auto ethnographical form of reflexivity involves visual storytelling that "transcends mere narration of self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (Chang, 2008, 43). This is very useful for artists as a way of avoiding the exegesis becoming merely a *disconnected* commentary of the practice and one which is inward looking. The point of a good exegesis in my mind is to write from *within* the subject looking outward, as a distinct form of creative strategy that defines a meaningful and sustainable embodied practice.

¹ Bourdieu consistently argued that his conception of epistemic reflexivity provided not only a means of developing richer descriptions of the social world but also the basis for a more practically adequate and epistemologically secure social science (Maton, 2003, 53).

² Holistic reflexivity is defined as "an aesthetic and ethical apprehension grounded in an ontological framework of radical phenomenology" (Bleakley 2006).

For me, the cultural context of one's practice is essential to include as a foundation to a methodological approach to writing. Christopher Crouch states, "the creative artist assumes a process of meaning making, and that meaning and its process are contingent upon a cultural and social environment" (2007, 112). I align my approach with Anthony Giddens (1990), who takes a holistic view of modern societies and the way in which we can interact as reflexive practitioners. Giddens defines the process of analysis as a "chronic revision of social practice in the light of knowledge about those practices" (1990, 40). This embodies the sense of reassessment based on knowledge and experience developed into artistic practice as suggested by Crouch (2010). The "reflexive ordering and reordering of knowledge and social structures", according to Giddens, is what constitutes modern reflexivity: a "thoroughgoing, constitutive reflexivity" (1990, 52) that characterises all human action in a modern society.

For the visual artist I am a great supporter of the electronic exegesis. A well-designed e-file offers greater possibilities for interaction, active referencing, hyperlinks, movie files and overall layout than the traditionally printed copy. Finally the hardest part, editing! I recommend using a good editor who is not connected to your research study. A dispassionate editor is like your surgeon; they can be relied upon to identify and remove the least essential organ however much you were emotionally attached to it.

Here are some references for exegetical writing that you might find useful:

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