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The studio in fine art research

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The Studio in Fine Art Research.

Paper at *Research as Gesture*, Central Saint Martins, Feb 2016

You can find across Cuba evidence of a period of remarkable technological improvisation, invention, reinvention, especially through the 1980s and 90s. To give one example, people would saw their washer-driers in half when the tumble-dryer part stopped working. The compacted washing machine would take up less space in the home, and people would extract the motor from the tumble drier half and turn it into a shoe-polishing machine, a desk fan, a key copying lathe. “Technological disobedience” is how Ernesto Oroza describes his fellow Cubans’ “audacity to confront very complex technology”. They “think beyond the normal capabilities of an object,” he says, “and try to surpass the limitations it imposes on itself. [...] This kind of object imposes a limit on the user, because it comes with an established technological code, which hardly ever satisfies all of the users’s needs [...]. He manages to go beyond the object’s capabilities.”

Oroza talks about how the Cubans of the time “disrespected the ‘authority’ held by these contemporary objects. How [they] surpassed this authority. I often put forth this analogy,” he says: “the same way a surgeon, having opened so many bodies, becomes insensitive to blood, to the smell of blood and organs, it’s the same for a Cuban. Once he has opened a fan, he is used to seeing everything from the inside, everything dismantled. All of the symbols that unify an object, that make it an unique entity—for a Cuban they don’t exist.”

I saw a film about this over the weekend, and it made me think of today’s conversation, and of the practice-led doctorate I’m two thirds of the way through. This audacity, this particular kind of felt, working understanding, accumulated by seeing everything from the inside, and how this enabled them to confront technologies *in* their authority and rewrite them—this seemed to describe something of the artist’s encounters with, confrontations with, and rewriting of knowledges that are traditionally at home within institutions of Higher Education, exceeding the limits of established codes that fail to satisfy the needs of artistic practice.

To give you an example of what I mean: in the studio at the moment I’ve been drawing with a camera lucida: a prism on a flexible stand that lets you to trace onto your page an image of whatever is immediately in front of you. The thing about drawing with the camera lucida is that it takes a great deal of practice to get it right, and the practice and the technique and all the adjusting, refocussing, readjusting is completely absorbing. Without going into the detail of it, the fact is that throughout the process, at no point do I look up from the page, so to speak. I burrow about inside this work, only ever seeing it from the inside, from right up close.

And with the work done I can choose to burrow my way out, brush myself off, and I can regard the work from up here in the light. I can *read* it. I can show it to other people and they can read it, and

between us we might find this is Laura Mulvey, Donna Harroway, Laura U Marks on the skin of the film. This is Agamben, Rilke, Zen and trying not to know. Derrida and Jean-Luc Nancy on the blindness of the tip of the pencil and its relation to thought and hermeneutics. Klee, Kandinsky, Claude Heath, Monika Gryzmala and the space around the page. Tim Ingold on lines, navigation and wayfaring. And I have read and seen some of these things and some of them I have not, but as the list grows I am faced with a bright, wide, shimmering deficit of knowledge—the landscape that turns out to have been all around me as I surface from my burrow.

As I rove around up here and find out more about what, in the context of practice-led doctoral research might be called the “contexts” surrounding my practice, the “theory” informing my practice, I find I have a particular familiarity, a nativeness, an ease that feels akin to the familiarity of Oroza’s inventive Cubans, who are audaciously insensitive to the smell [of the blood] of the established technological code because they are so used to the insides of the machines. When I surface from the burrow of my studio and rove around the terrain that turns out to be all around me, I find myself at home. I know how a sentence, a proposition, a chapter is going to end. And when it turns out to end differently, I keep my ending anyway. I keep my ending even more. As often as not I find that my studio research has a feel of the literature already, and that already it has been setting about rearranging its terms, cutting things in half, tearing out the motors and using them for something else.

Now this image of studio practice as somehow burrowing, as blind, myopic, groping about, not-knowing—this image persists in my conception of my own studio practice, and it’s an image that’s become prominent in recent years (think of Rebecca Fortnum and Elizabeth Fisher’s edited volume *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, for instance. 2013). It’s an image that also characterises the creeping forward of the tip of the pencil during the process of drawing—a burrowing through the dark, with all attention, all attentiveness, all awareness focussed at that point of contact with the page, at the matter in hand, at the making process as it’s unfolding, at the breaking edge of its coming into being.

I wonder if this image also underlies some of the assumptions that set in opposition terms like practice/theory, art/research, artist/researcher in the context of the practice-led doctorate.

Because if we do associate studio methodologies with not-knowingness, then how, where, and maybe even *why*, would this not-knowingness encounter knowingness? What is that encounter like? And is *that* the encounter we expect artists to negotiate when they undertake a practice-led doctorate?

I’ve already suggested one way to imagine this encounter: a surfacing from underground, a periodic coming up for air, from darkness into light, into something like enlightenment. It’s an image I find problematic. It makes me think of Kafka’s mole-like animal and its occasional dramatic excursions from its burrow. It describes its compulsion to surface and dart about and hunt on the mossy grass above, in the same breath as asking *what reasonable grounds might there possibly be* for risking the

protection of the self-sufficient and well-nourished environment of the burrow, of which he has complete mastery. Why leave?

Or more specifically perhaps, why pit the darkness, closeness, blindness of the studio against, presumably, the light, the open horizons, the sightedness of the Academy? Though I do find the narrative of not-knowingness quite compelling and familiar to my own working process, it runs into trouble when it encounters the rubrics and traditions of Higher Education. So in the service of the status of studio-led research it might be worth revisiting this narrative of not-knowingness, darkness, blindness, because it suggests that what the Academy can lend to the equation is knowingness, light, sight, and this seems profoundly at odds with the idea of a research project *led by practice*.

What compels the animal to keep emerging from his burrow is the “infinite pleasure and reassurance” of finding a safe place from which to observe the entrance of his tunnel from the outside, and to imagine himself safe inside, in the dark, in the reverie of sleep and with the organs and the smell and the blood of the morsels he’s hunted in the open air consumed and incorporated into his sleeping body. This is why we might leave. So that the encounter can be fused, incorporated, into one’s body // of knowledge, even one’s bodily knowledge.

And with this in mind perhaps we can try to replace darkness, not-knowingness and blindness with touch, immediacy, responsiveness—that audacious surgical familiarity that comes from knowing things from the inside perhaps even before you know them from the outside. This audacity seems to result from a particular form of working knowledge—(not a subject-specialism but a method-specialism perhaps)—adept at reacting to changing forms, circumstances and demands as they arise, and navigating them by touch rather than by recourse to knowledges established outside.

So I want to close with a final image that breaks with the picture I’ve described so far, of periodic emerging from a darkened burrow. It’s an image often associated with the kind of enquiry we could probably describe as hermeneutic rather than epistemic. Not a question of knowing or not-knowing, but a question of knowing *how* rather than knowing *what*.

The image I have in mind is of a vessel on water, the helmsman continually making slight adjustments to the tiller as she feels it move against the palm of her hand as it’s moved by the forces of current underwater. The artist *knows* the way the helmsman *knows*, adapting, dismantling, reinventing her course as she goes along, on the basis of changes she feels taking place in real time in the ever-shifting environment all around. As Emma Cocker writes (who incidentally also developed this description of thought from a description of drawing) this is “a form of knowledge that is activated or emerges simultaneous to the situation it attempts to comprehend, and [which] alone is adequate to the task of comprehending the situation. This is a way of knowing that cannot be transferred or *banked*, not accumulated into the knowledge of the encyclopaedia.”

I'll close with this: what I find most generative about the image of the helmsman is what it does to the question of the encounter. If the image shows an encounter at all, it's nothing like a occasional surfacing from a burrow, with gulps of air, morsels of goodness swallowed and taken down underground. Rather than a moment of confrontation between what is not known and what is known, we have a continuous engagement between a way of knowing and the conditions that challenge and permit that way of knowing. "The art of the helmsman*," again I quote: "can only be exercised within the framework of the uncertainty and instability of the sea. The play of the tiller cannot be dissociated from the movement of the waves."

So there we have a handful of images, some of which correspond and some of which contradict one another, but which together I hope offer us some imaginative tools with which to improvise, dismantle, reinvent the positions of Fine Art research.

*Detienne and Vernant