

Giving Form to Inquiry - A perspective on practice led research in art in the public sphere

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Reflections on the Plurel programme

I would like to thank Dr Amanda Ravetz for the invitation to speak to day at this seminar. In particular I appreciate the opportunity to become familiar with your unique Master's programme - one that I find both exciting and forward thinking, probably unique in its field. I will make reference during this presentation to what I feel are key qualities that I would love to explore also in my own cultural context:

1. the sharing a common knowledge base and set of issues i.e. the peri culture of Greater Manchester, building work from the texture of one's own back yard in a way that is shared with other artists and with individuals of other disciplines
2. the insistence upon a deep knowledge of context with art as a process of intervention within that context, in particular the notion of the 'evocative project' - opening up the eyes and ears of key 'stakeholders'
3. allowing individuality to emerge from that basis i.e. in dialogue with its circumstances rather than inscribed in institutionalised rituals of production and consumption
4. connecting research and practice at Masters level

Introducing On The Edge (OTE) (www.ontetheedgeresearch.org)

All four qualities resonate with the kinds of approaches that we have been developing through the agency of On the Edge, which, like Plurel, is a research programme.

OTE researches the changing nature of art in the public sphere by developing its own interventions that are articulated through research questions working with artists of different kinds. OTE is also based in a deep knowledge of context (intellectual as well as the knowledge of living/working in a particular place).

Who are we? - a small research group partly within Gray's School of Art but mainly developing as a network of individuals, such as Chris Fremantle - research associate to OTE and creative producer, - a group of people that is interested in the issues of

research and art in public. As far as possible formal partnerships with organisations become cemented by external funding. In particular we have developed projects with Performing Arts Labs, London - an organisation that gathers experienced artists into laboratory spaces for the development of new work.

We work with individuals in other universities - cultural policy, anthropology, management, cultural theory. We work within a national, Scottish based network and an international network of artists including Suzanne Lacy, artist and professor at Otis College, Los Angeles; Tim Collins, Associate Dean at Wolverhampton and Reiko Goto, currently research student to OTE; David Haley, Miriad, MMU; Helen and Newton Harrison, University of Santa Cruz, California among others.

I would like to reference a definition of practice led research offered last week by the art historian, Jean Pierre Greff, Director of the Geneva School of the Arts at the event of Sensuous Knowledges Conference in Bergen, September 2008. He said

" Research led by the practice of the arts is concerned with how one can engage with the means of art to develop the field of art and create new possibilities for the work".

This is a refreshing definition that is not bureaucratically driven. However, in the light of the work here and also OTE we might push this definition further:

Research led by the practice of the arts is concerned with how one can engage with the means of art to develop the field of art and *its role in the public sphere* and create new possibilities for the work as well as new insights into *how we live or might live in the world working alongside other disciplines and sectors*.

It is this extended vision into art's relationship *in the world* that I feel we have in common with the programme here at MIRIAD, MMU.

Positioning

But first a positioning that has come through conversations with Dr Amanda Ravetz.

The current ethos for training an artist and designer is to foreground the individual as practitioner.

However, experience of working in public as a professional artist and researcher has highlighted for me the value and importance of 'working together' - the importance of engaging in dialogic and collaborative processes. This has increasingly become a core skill and essential competency, but one that rarely seriously addressed in undergraduate training - at least not in Scotland.

Within the professional field these apparently different ways of being an artist - through individuality or through collaboration - have increasingly become 'ghettoised' as separate approaches within very different aesthetics and value systems. There is possibly an even more dangerous assumption lurking within them-

that working as individual equates with studio work in systems of production and distribution that are museum or gallery based

and correspondingly

that working in public, in particular in the social realm such as health/education, is a negation of individuality and instrumentalises the artist.

The term 'instrumentalises' is significant. It refers to the political in art. Who gives power/permission to whom to make and distribute the work in the public sphere? This question goes beyond individual desire or will to make art.

So perhaps we might dig deeper- Is work made in the studio and distributed in the gallery free from being instrumentalised? Is it in some sense a more pure expression of the individual by being made/conceived by them 'in isolation' /as sole author? A brief glance at the current events in relation to Sotheby's and Damian Hirst (whom incidentally does not 'make' his own work but nonetheless 'authors' the work) tells an interesting story. Arguably Hirst's work currently matters because of its symbolic value as

commodity in the market place, not in relation to the specific content of each piece. In this example the individuality and meaning of the work is to some extent erased.



Fig 1 *For the Love of God*, 2007 was sold through Sotheby's for 1 million dollars to an unnamed investment group <http://images.google.co.uk>

In contrast one might take the work of an artist like Suzanne Lacy, whose artwork has predominantly come about through an independency between the artist and participants or communities of interest in the issues that the work addresses - media manipulation of women, youth and race among others. Suzanne has developed a thinking discipline around not being absorbed as an artist within the social/political processes that the work engages. She insists on *both* developing highly collaborative experiences as well as retaining her identity as a radical feminist artist, effectively playing the tension between those two seemingly contradictory values.

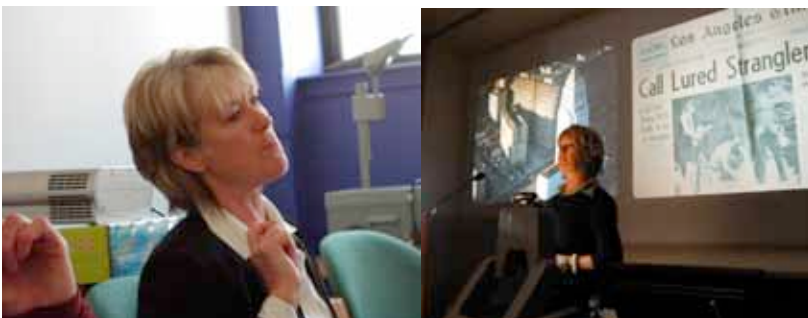


Fig 2 www.workinginpublic.org 2007 and Guest@Grays 2005

Lacy is one of a number of artists working in the public sphere whom we know to be 'individuals' - Joseph Beuys, Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison, Barbara Stevini and John Latham of Artist Placement Group. By studying their processes and articulations

alongside our own, it becomes possible to see the issue of autonomy differently. My understanding of Joseph Beuys was that he acknowledged how the world works by engaging the social/cultural construction of artists as 'unique individual' sufficiently and with a degree of disinterestedness, playfulness even, in order for his ideas to have status, to be heard. He signed and sold multiples within the gallery based commodity market in order to secure the wherewithal to realise *7,000 Oaks* project, Documenta 7 in 1982. He operated within the tension and contradiction of simultaneously being an individual artist and also a public citizen¹.

Looking deeply into the practices of other artists, in particular through their own articulations, has incidentally become a very important aspect of OTE's research and one that we feel is significantly underestimated as a core aspect of the knowledge base within the discipline.

As artists we have to exercise choice in where we position ourselves. We have to know the basis of that choice. This demands three areas of knowledge : self knowledge - understanding who we are and what most drives us, including our relationship with craft of making; secondly and as previously mentioned, the knowledge of the practices of other artists i.e. the deep qualities/principles of those practices and thirdly a knowledge of the history of ideas/value systems, or 'theory', as a basis for moving forward effectively. The triangulation of theory, personal practice and contemporary and historical practices is explored by Aslaug Nyrnes in her paper *Lighting from the Side*, University of Bergen 2006. She articulates these three as points of navigation that are equally important but that may exist in different proportions in any research/post graduate or individual practice².

However, we might take this even further - Paulo Friere³, Brazilian pedagogist, suggests that there are two different approaches to education. One is articulated through the metaphor of banking - information fed to us from one direction. The second is analytical -

¹ Suzanne Lacy visits this same issue in Seminar 2 of Working in Public. Working with Tom Trevor she explores the challenges of a public artist such as herself becoming a presence and developing a legacy through the museum and gallery system without being consumed by it (see www.workinginpublicseminars.org)

² Nyrnes, A. (2006) *Lighting from the Side* Bergen National Academy of the Arts as part of Focus on Artistic Research and Development, Sensuous Knowledges

³ Friere, P (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* Continuum Press

If we analyse the conditions of our own oppression, we are able to move forward from that analysis into informed action. Friere was talking in the context of Brazilian peasants in the mid 20th century but his words are extremely resonant currently in relation to the political and economic. Is Hirst analysing the conditions of his own oppression or is he being co-opted into a particular economic construction? For Lacy, Beuys and others it is this analysis and the unfolding of new perspectives and processes that is the point of the work.

Understanding how an artist works critically in terms of this broader social/cultural analysis would appear to be at the core of both of our programmes - Plurel and OTE. As such they constitute opportunities to rethink issues such as individuality/artistic autonomy - less as a claim to a right (meaning that is the 'nature of art', 'freedom necessary to the creative process') - and more as a rediscovery of what it means to be an artist now in the contemporary world and in dialogue with the texture and issues of that world. So the questions

What is art research?

and

What is art in the public sphere?

are two closely related questions and act as a leitmotif throughout this paper.

On the Edge Phase 1 (2001-4) funded by Arts and Humanities Research Board/Council

On The Edge came about precisely by taking the issue of context seriously as a starting point for post doctoral research e.g. the specific cultural context of an art school/university. Grays within RGU is different from Manchester. It is situated in the oil capital of Europe at the edge of Scotland's most remote and rural regions - the Highlands and Islands.

Having lived and worked in regeneration and public art in NE England, I discovered on moving here 14 years ago, the degree to which contemporary visual art was and is dependent upon urban, if not also metropolitan ways of living. This feeling was shared with a number of other individuals, each of whom were responsible for running important cultural organisations in the region and who had themselves come from major cities

across the world - New York, London, Edinburgh and Glasgow, Vienna, Buenos Aires to name a few.

As an artist and individual who had made the move north, I felt 'beached', dislocated from the reference points that had informed the work to this point. These reference points had little or no resonance in this different culture. A choice presented itself

To look beyond one's immediate circumstances, 'over one's shoulder' to the urban, metropolitan art world and try to continue that art /research conversation or

To look deeply into the immediate local circumstances as the basis for developing new knowledge.

Over time and through intense collaboration with those other individuals sharing the dilemma, a shared research project emerged with some important questions. By placing remote rural culture at the centre, we effectively raised the issue of quality in art and what that meant - What is art of quality? Who defines it and for whom?

Implicit within this construction was a political dimension that I touched on earlier. Policy in the arts was then, and still is, increasingly driven by the issue of inclusion. At the time inclusion was defined as a question of provision - *access to* what was already going on, in other words *access to* the urban metropolitan forms of art making in a remote rural context. Apart from being a logistical challenge, this construction assumes that life styles and value systems are homogeneous as defined by the urban. What many of us actually experienced by living in remote rural parts of Scotland, was a strong sense of tradition and history, threads of self organised culture that sit in tension with the urban/ consumer culture. The assumption that inclusion could be solved by provision, could effectively be interpreted as a form of exclusion of other alternative approaches.

One of the characteristics of 'rural' is that there is no concept of public. A commonly shared understanding and experience of public derives from the 'agora' - the Greek theatre as a meeting place in which one was anonymous, able to touch on a subject and move on as a member of an audience. In rural places it is rarely possible to be anonymous in this sense. It is only in urban spaces that one can act as flâneur. Much of the experience of contemporary art is constructed around this notion of public in relation

to the gallery, concert hall, theatre i.e. conventional forms of distribution that assume an audience - a group of people who are to an extent targeted in relation to that work and who effectively support its presence in the public sphere. In remote, rural contexts there is no viable construct of 'audience'. There are people who live in largely geographically defined communities, who work co-operatively and sometimes competitively with other communities. There are also communities of interest that cut across geographical communities. There are positive and negative aspects to this lack of anonymity. In relation to art both in the rural and periurban i.e. the further one is from the urban/metropolitan, the more important it becomes to construct a process around the absence of a notion of public in this assumed sense, to understand the actual processes by which individuals come together and to work imaginatively within them⁴.

Essentially as a network of partners we were beginning to sense the possibility of a different way of being an artist that needed to play the tension between the local context and its rich potential and wider networks of individuals and organisations.

We developed a methodology based in partnership working with five different organisations in remote rural parts of Northern Scotland, mainly Aberdeenshire and including Shetland. The methodology involved developing 5 live art projects/interventions that responded to the challenges and visions of the partner organisations (importantly not the style of working of individual artists initially). We packed the proposal into an AHRB/C bid and were successful, securing funding for 4 years (2001-4).

⁴ This observation - extending the notion of audience into a construction of relations built on the notion of the classical theatre - was made by Chris Fremantle, research associate to On the Edge.

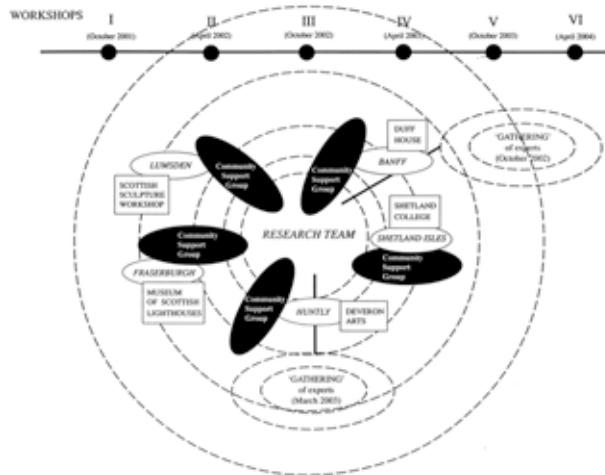


Fig. 3 On the Edge network

In attempting to describe this approach as an aesthetic (borrowing some tools of thinking from Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison) I could describe what happened as follows

We opened up a **field of play** between dimensions of the experience

Between existing social narratives - 'art as product' economic symbolism v 'art as experience/shared experience' holding these in tension, inclusion as provision v inclusion as participation,

Between the artist as maker of product and the artist as respondent/interlocutor in a conversation within place

Between urban/metropolitan and rural values/modes of distribution in art

Effectively the research hosted a process by which artists and creative organisations were **invited into an existing cultural landscape** with its own narratives of place, relationship, cultural/artistic traditions. First the research team worked with the partner organisations and their challenges and desires in relation to remote rural - a process that was painstaking and that at times quite vigorously challenging assumptions about how art is made, often provoking the response - When do we stop talking and start the project?

Once these had gained some clarity, this network of research team and partner organisations began to identify appropriate artists and extend the dialogue to them. The role of the artist was to **see the challenges freshly**, reveal aspects that were unexpected, effectively respond to the development thus far, perhaps **target assumptions of place** and values were dormant and even dysfunctional, **pose**

alternative readings and processes, opening up new directions of play and **working with the outcomes and consequences**⁵.

In this first phase of work 2001-4, the partner organisations included Duff House, the outstation of the National Galleries of Scotland in Banff; Scottish Sculpture Workshop in Lumsden; Deveron Arts a community arts organisation in Huntly; Shetland College, Lerwick the Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, in Fraserburgh.

Duff House presented the issue of responding to lost heritage in the form of a 16th century painted ceiling⁶.

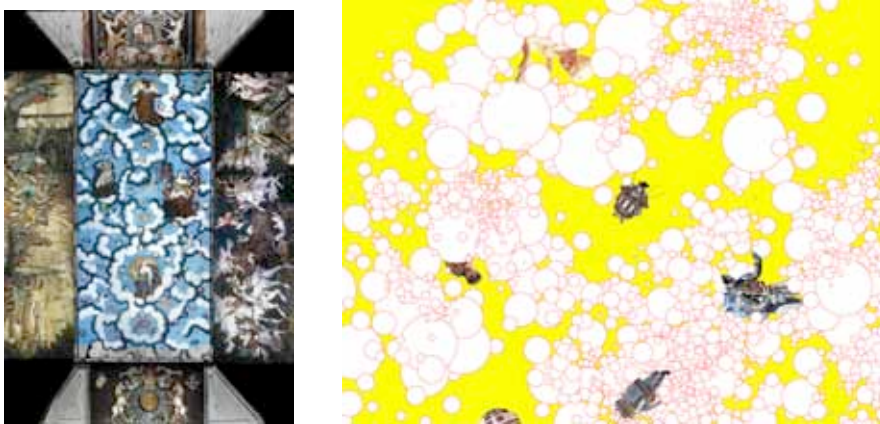


Fig 4 16th century ceiling lost in fire - 21st century ceiling - artist Robert Orchardson

SSW presented the issue of change in a village of 300 inhabitants from agriculture as the main economy and reason for being of the village engaging the role of artists in rethinking that relationship⁷.

⁵ Helen Mayer and Newton Harrison have articulated their own creative process authoring some of these key concepts. Their articulation is constructed around how we inhabit metaphor, in particular focusing on the kinds of shifts that artists can bring about through a more critical and imaginative engagement with metaphor. see Harrison, H. & N. (2008) *Public Culture and Sustainable Practices: Peninsula Europe from an ecodiversity perspective, posing questions to Complexity Scientists* in Structure and Dynamics: eJournal of Anthropological and Related Studies repositories.cdlib.org/imbs/socdyn/sdeas/vol2/iss3/art3/

⁶ Project monograph: Douglas, A. ed (2005) *Celestial Ceiling* The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Historic Scotland
1 90-1 085 813

⁷ Project monograph: Douglas, Fremantle, C. & Delday, H. ed (2006) *Inthrow* The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Duncan of Jordanston College of Art, University of Dundee ISBN: 1 901 085 80 5



Fig 5 360° view of Lumsden from *Inthrow* edited by Douglas 2005

Deveron Arts wanted to explore the meaning of town artist and the concept of town as gallery.

Shetland College needed to think through their role and responsibility in relation to traditional knitting on Shetland and its possible disappearance. These are all output in project monographs⁸.



Fig 6 Maakin Lab Shetland 2001-4

The Museum of Scottish Lighthouses were challenged by being on the one hand possible the most important centre in Europe for the history and development of the modern lighthouse and on the other rarely visited by local people⁹.

⁸Project Monograph: Douglas, A. (2005) ed *How might we revalue traditional ways of making?*

The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Performing Arts Labs, London
ISBN 1 901 085 82 1

⁹ Project Monograph: P.Carter (2004) ed *Edge FM* (postscript essay A. Douglas)

I am going to trace through one of the projects - Edge FM in a little more detail to show this process of responding to an existing landscape, seeing the challenges freshly, targeting assumptions and posing new readings.

This narrative draws on an earlier paper that I developed with Chris Fremantle, presented at Sensuous Knowledges conference 2¹⁰.



Fig 7 Edge FM, Fraserburgh 2001-4

David said imagine a particular coastal town on the most north-eastern point of the Scottish coast line. Like many others in these parts it has been dependent upon fishing as an industry. The headland is in a treacherous place if you happen to be a sailor. Generations of inhabitants have developed the means of communicating to people in ships out at sea. They have built, maintained and used lighthouses that have evolved over generations. These are now redundant, replaced by new, more accurate and versatile technology located in outer space - global positioning systems. The young people of this town are interested in new technologies, not the old ones. They are (also) interested in skateboarding and text messaging. They face a new challenge. This challenge is connected with the sea. What might this town become? They say we now need to think about this.

Can you help us? We felt that we could.

David asked the researchers to help figure out how to interest and involve young people in the museum. It was possibly one of the most important museums in Europe in lighthouse technologies. David was interested in young people. He was interested in how they use technology to communicate in new ways. This town was where the modern

The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Museum of Scottish Lighthouses, Fraserburgh ISBN 1 901 085 79 1

¹⁰http://www.khib.no/khib/media/03_konferanser_og_seminar/list_of_presentations

lighthouse had been developed, and where Marconi had made the first radio broadcasts. Its history was unique. It was part of the heritage of the town. It was the heritage of the young people who lived in the town. There was a clear connection between the invention of the lighthouse to communicate to ships at sea and the invention of the mobile phone that young people used extensively. Both were means of communicating via technology.

David invited people in the town to meet the researchers - teachers, community leaders, young business people. After some time they were joined by an artist. This artist invited a group of skateboarders to come to the museum. About twenty came. They knew each other. The young people laughed when the artist showed them his recent sculpture. It assumed the presence of extra terrestrial life. The sculpture was made from this and that, from what was around him. It looked like things that the young people themselves could have made.

The artist suggested that they should build a radio station that the young people could use. He came each Saturday and worked with the group of skateboarders. They worked from one of the lighthouse keeper's cottages in part of the museum. They made up rules. They made a banner and a logo. They made a name – Edge FM. They applied for a licence to broadcast. They took digital recorders into the town and asked about Fraserburgh as home. They asked “What would you change in Fraserburgh?” “Do you like Fraserburgh?” “What would make Fraserburgh better?” Over a weekend in August Edge FM broadcast the different perspectives that had been collected.

“It’s like some parts a toon’s really minky an that’s what abdy look at but they hanna look at the good bits”

The question of engaging young people in a museum of lighthouses became a projection by them of the future of their town. The artist and the project provided them with a new space.



Fig 8 Edge FM rules and poster. Paul Carter with Edge FM participant

There are several moments of testing assumptions not revealed in this narrative

At the outset we were not there to 'clock up' another art project but rather explore the ground and understand the challenges facing David Bettt, the Director. We needed to suspend belief about any solutions - even entertaining the possibility that nothing should happen.

As the project emerged, the team and a steering group went far along on the road towards a digital project - a proposal that the artists challenged and reversed. In his view, it would define his relationship with the young people as teacher/learner rather than giving them the means from the outset to be in command of their own forms of communication. He challenged the implicit assumptions of our construction and opened a new, more appropriate course of direction.

For the research network and local steering group this was an art project. For the young people this was 'something to do' - an observation that exactly echoes with that of a young person who participated in Suzanne Lacy's Oakland projects and who she recently interviewed 10 years on. That said the revisiting of this town in post industrial decline through its young people gave those young people a space to explore impressions of their home space - positive and negative. It challenged the assumption that young people have no 'voice' in adult affairs. In fact arguably the project altered perceptions of the adult world of Fraserburgh of the young people, the young people of themselves and inhabitants of themselves. It challenged the idea that skateboarders did not mix with bmxers who did not get on with roller bladders. The project revealed that the

young were not parochial, but rather well travelled and in a sense better informed than their cosmopolitan equivalent. Paul Carter, as the project artist, was struck by the ideas that the interviews generated for Fraserburgh – the identification of different potential economic resources – Fraserburgh as surfing capital of Europe.

The project questioned and altered power relations between the Museum's infrastructure and young people momentarily. Guides (guards) had to give up sole control of space and allow for different co-existence of young for period of the project. Everyday lives became subject of museum space for a while. We raised the possibility of whether a skate boarder could become a guide for a day?

The project also generated links between museum and skate park, young and old, professional and lay without attempting to contain these, like stone thrown into pool generates energy and also dissipates, engages with other energies

The material culture of the project was crude, simply made, direct and playful not well crafted, aesthetically honed – informal, improvised, not attempting to be consumed or to generate profit. Real artistic quality of the project is immaterial, experiential.

In the postscript to the project monograph, I wrote the following assessment. I feel that is still holds true.

"In some clear and fundamental way, Edge FM has articulated some of the key and real challenges of contemporary art in relation to its specific cultural, social or political context. Its form or aesthetic is essentially immaterial, even though material presence is traditionally the dominant vehicle of communication in the visual arts. This is usually manifest in highly crafted, aestheticised and consumable things. In this project, things are informal, improvised and not intended to be consumed or to generate profit. They are part of a series of interdependent elements that make a structure proposed by the artist and acted upon by others who choose to take part in his process.

Edge FM reverses many of the values normally or traditionally celebrated in the VA. In this reversal, an image is constructed in one's mind's eye that is lasting

and holds good well beyond the moments or incidences of the actual process. It is as if the experience that the artist helps us to construct, acts like a trajectory into a different world, where new values pertain and where we might, by being present and attentive, recover the essence of our humanity"¹¹

Summary and Conclusions

This presentation has attempted to construct ways of thinking about the relationship between practice and research that respond credibly but in a critically different way from inherited models of either arts practice or academic research practice in the sciences.

It views the coming together of research and practice as a creative/intellectual challenge. We often reference John Dewey as key to articulating the relationship of practice to research

"Activity that is not **checked by observation** of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas"¹²

I have articulated this reflection as a triangulation of coming to know oneself, the practices of related artists and the theoretical context of ideas. I have not dealt with that theoretical context in any depth. We have drawn on Grant Kester and his notion of *Dialogic Aesthetics* as well as more recently *Pragmatic Aesthetics*, of which Dewey is a key exponent. That is for another discussion.

Research is often conflated with the idea of 'text', preferably a very heavy one. It is also often conflated with questions as a means to an end result - an answer that is derived from a method that gives that answer credibility. Constructed this way, it is a linear process.

¹¹ see Carter 2004 footnote 9

¹² Dewey Experience and Education 1938 reprint Touchstone 1997

I would like to offer for discussion a different construction - Research through the arts is in a creative space and a sociable process - a 'field of play'. Method is not applied to it but rather is the means by which the space exists in the first place - a means of action and immersion, a means to construct and communicate ideas, experiences and critical thinking purposefully.

It is possible for method to be transparent without losing its inductive, exploratory quality. Paul Klee's Notebooks and his notion of the 'thinking eye' is a remarkable example of this transparency.

Such an approach to the relationship between art practice and research is evident in Ravetz and Grimshaw's analysis of observational cinema and the coming together of methods of art making with ethnographic practice.

"Hence the final piece, *Mr Wade*, is not intended to offer knowledge about, or an explanation of, pigeon racing. Instead the intention is to draw the viewer into an imaginary encounter where knowledge is not the result of experience, but rather is constituted as experience, understood not as sealed and complete but as irreducibly relational and open. In this way the work of interpretation and analysis in observational cinema is held to be ongoing, embedded and inseparable from the moment of filming and the moment of viewing "¹³

¹³ Grimshaw, A. & Ravetz, A *Rethinking Observational Cinema* JRIA
pp 22-24