The reckless and the artless: practical research and digital painting
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To a painter 'artefact' may simply mean something general like a painted canvas. In computer graphics an artefact is a blip, a rogue pixel cluster, a blister on a photo, usually an unwelcome by-product. You might say painters produce unwelcome by-products. Here the question is about artefacts and research, or rather artefacts as research. I shall try and talk about this, here and there taking a digital angle, but first I must allude to some of the complications of playing the roles of researcher, artist and writer at the same time. After that I will turn to the artefact question itself, and in conclusion I shall illustrate one or two methods of translating digital ideas into physical form.

1 Artist or Researcher?

I often feel like running away from this whole business of 'research'. It can be like living inside a flow-chart: from research question to footnote etiquette, published paper to peer review. A painter simply does not fit into this diagram: you are looking and foot-noting all the time, working more like a thief and opportunist, following your nose. This may be a familiar complaint, and you may say it is no bad thing to confine the capricious mood swings of artistic temperament inside an iron framework. But I would also say that artists do develop their own methods and disciplines, and their work – their artefacts – are the proof of this. Instead of asking about the role of the artefact, I would be asking about the relevance of research, of whether a well-tried studio routine has to be re-engineered to fit a one-size-fits-all method of classifying research.

You may say that anyone with an AHRB Research Fellowship must already have taken some liberties by defining what they do as research – or 'art practice'. I do find this term 'art practice' puzzling, implying that there could be some other way of doing art – it also implies 'professional' status, as if you have an established local clientele like a doctor or lawyer. I find it grotesque to think of a painting like Matisse's Dance as a 'research outcome'. It is grotesque too to think that art has to look intellectual to be intellectual. The leaden jargon we write on funding applications seems quite irreconcilable with the spirit that makes art what it is. The very language downgrades first-hand experience, inhibiting the first person: don't say 'I saw'; say 'it was observed'. Everything has to be witnessed

'objectively' by this hypothetical third party. When I feel trapped in this Kafka-esque universe I rush off and make some drawings, celebrating my empty-headed state of mind. And of course, these can turn out to be rubbish, but here and there they look much more considered - research savvy - than the slow-burn projects. For the moment I just want to mention the need not just to reflect, but to react, to feel, to work spontaneously and intuitively.

My 'digital painting' project also involves a book, and when I had to pitch this idea to the publisher he did not require the 13 pages of carefully burnished research speak. He wanted something quite different, what he calls the elevator version: basically just one catchy sentence. What I came up with, after months of struggle, was more than one sentence, but I could say it between the ground floor and the first floor:

Can a painter 'go digital' and still remain a painter? Can the ramshackle culture of painting, the patch and mend methods of the studio be transplanted onto the office desktop? In the studio the printmaker has a brown apron and shelves of arcane chemicals. On the desktop the printer is a beige box. Does the same fate await the painter?

That is not quite a research question, but a way of selling a project, and similarly a painting has to have some appeal to the viewer. If it is to be disseminated spontaneously, it has to be more than a worthy research artefact. Allen Ginsberg described a good poem as being like a radio station that went on broadcasting for eternity.

I am not going to go into the detail of my project here, except to say its current tile is 'Blink: Painting through Digital Eyes' and it should be published in summer `05. It involves my working on more than one front simultaneously – painting, writing - as well as crossing between the painting community and the computer graphics community. I mention this discipline of encapsulating an idea for another reason. You may think that working through computers in painting automatically gives you the edge: the associations of software code, computer labs, and new media; combining art and new technology sounds researchy so why the worry? The worry, and why I felt impelled to undertake the project, is not about its status as research, but its status as art. Putting this simply, given the miracles of computer graphics the 'artefacts' of digital painting – I leave to one side whether these are physical or digital objects – are not as good as they should be. By and large the painting community has not understood the technology and how to adapt to it. Nor has the software caught up with the painters.

This may be quite a generalisation, but let me point out that paintings on exhibition are not like neutralised artefacts in a lab; viewers are susceptible to 'read' what they see quite differently depending on whether it is in the foyer of the local library or in Tate Modern. I can demonstrate this by photos of roughly the same works of mine that have been shown at a crowded computer show, at the John Moores competition, or an upmarket gallery. Digital work is often exhibited online and at trade shows, where until recently you would have to own up to the software and hardware you had used. So such 'art objects' emanate quite different research messages according to where they are seen, and according to the expectations of the viewer.

2 Artefacts as Research

The more I have thought about the connecting point between painting and research the harder it has become to say anything useful. I have come across fine art department web sites which say something lame like 'it is our view that fine art practice can be considered as research' and list the various exhibitions of their 'research active' staff, some impressive, some not so impressive. One question this begs is whether all 'art practice' everywhere is research, or only the work of the 'artists' of this department. Does this mean that all paintings need to be reclassified as research objects, so we could end up with a league table of research-rated museums? Do PhD artists make better art? Can you do great research without realising you are doing it? Should we build in some specialist referencing so that so that only a few research students can hack into it? My answer in all these cases is that no, any credible research project has to set out its stall, its own distinctive frame of reference, and has to be viable as first-rate art. It's not enough to stick a 'research' label over an 'art practice' label, and hope for the best.

It is interesting – and also confusing – to speculate about the kind of objects and artefacts that would figure in some court case as to whether such material was legal research material or not. If we were talking about how research of various kinds – military, dental, extra-sensory – has become associated with creating art then we would have to include Cornelia Parker's Dark Matter – the shed blown up by the army, Stelarc`s stomach sculpture, and numerous sci-art digital projects that sample arctic weather patterns. The dominant model has become the sci-art project, where the co-opted 'scientist' is Brains and the artist is Magician. This gives a misleading impression that a painter, for example, has to borrow the research, and that the research, to use another cliché, has to be cutting-edge in a scientific sense to be research. Stephen Wilson's encyclopaedic book on new media art, 'Information Arts', scarcely mentions a painter among the hundreds of artist-researchers. It leaves me, and some other digital artists feeling some ambivalence, with so many grainy black and white photos of art 'experiments' conducted in lab conditions. It makes the whole enterprise look like a science fiction genre, a fifties B movie, an 'Outer Limits' episode perhaps. One artist in the book, Perry Hoberman, gives performances parodying this dumb faith in the scientist. Artists could attach themselves to other branches of research, or simply conduct their own. Nor, logically, for it to be research need it be 'cutting-edge'. No-one could deny that considerable research is involved in painting the portrait of the Lord Mayor.

If we exclude contemporary art, and paintings within so to speak living memory, then the question appears simpler. When the artefact is an obscure cult object unearthed on a dig, its role at the centre of an investigation by an archaeologist – or maybe a forensic pathologist – is clear enough. But complications soon arise when we take test cases – almost at random – and try and evaluate them critically as both research objects and art.

Take four cases from the late 1880`s, and think of yourself on a board of the then AHRB looking though the application forms. First on the table is a proposal from a Paul Gauguin who requires funds to travel to the South Seas 'to conduct research'. A bit vague, I fear, and no timetable. Verdict: resubmit. Then a certain Eadweard Muybridge, a promising hi-tech project, but unfortunately he is working in the Veterinary Department at the University of Pennsylvania, and he doesn't even claim it to be art. Nowadays we could slot it in with conceptual art as a time/motion piece, but at the time it is not within our remit for art related projects. Then there is Georges Seurat, whose 'practice' does involve some colour theory, and he has been researching hard making studies on the banks of the Seine, but we also know that this painting never sold for its 5000 francs, so that started out as a bad bet. Finally there is this attractive project proposed by Henry Jamyn Brooks to paint a record of the 1888 Private View of the Old Master Exhibition at the Royal Academy – now

in the National Portrait Gallery. This was not only a remarkable research feat – given limitations such as he wasn't allowed to sketch the old master paintings in situ because of the resident 'detective', but because the naturalism was stitched together:

Such a picture as this is never painted now entirely from life sittings, but that photography is used to save time and spare the patience of those invited to form the group.

This remains a fascinating painting, and research document, containing not only a record of all the main players of the London art world from Ruskin to Holman Hunt, as well as Gladstone, but their implicit pecking order. Bear in mind also that it would be quite probable that several members of the board of the then AHRB would be among these distinguished guests. So of all these candidates I would bank on Brooks getting the A+.

To lean too heavily on a utilitarian definition of art research can squeeze out the very properties that make art what it is. There have been cases where an art object has proved dangerous because of its research content. Poor Anne of Cleves got in trouble with Henry VIII because it turned out Holbein had been somewhat flattering. Then there were the cases in 1936 and 38 when the customs on the USA and Dover impounded abstract paintings by Gris, Arp, Kandinsky, one on the grounds they were diagrams of secret military installations. I would also cite a landscape drawing manual in print in the sixties based on artillery spotters whose annotations of distance are close to the 'objective' measurements of the Euston Road School.

The current pressure on art and art history to be 'research-rich' has its absurd side. So if we looked at this question literally and asked what visual artefact is the most effective research window onto information the answer would have to be Google. It outclasses any painting by a factor of a zillion to one. The only competitor to Google I can think of, if we are talking of objects with embedded knowledge, has to be a cave painting inscribed with prime numbers, Armageddon-proof and intelligible to visiting aliens several millennia hence.

I do not want to conclude this section by sounding cynical. I see proper research as a tremendous means of invigorating the area of 'fine art', where many practitioners feel crushed by lack of success in the gallery world, and the constant quality assurance exercises in art schools. A research audit seems just another chore, and the last thing that is required is another lecture on research methodology. My own eureka moments have often come about through neglecting the 'good practice' recommendations advocated by the research seminar. If the word 'creative' is to mean anything, it must involve some lateral thinking. There's a huge difference in research between going through the motions and doing the real thing, and this is surely what any decent funding body is about. The Leverhulme Trust announces its fellowships with a warning against institutionalised research:

Among the many consequences of the evaluation culture within which the modern research community must operate is an increasingly ambivalent attitude to freedom. Long accepted as a necessary precondition for genuinely innovative work - the freedom to think the unthinkable is the conventionally required paradoxical attribute - freedom can now be seen as representing an alarming absence of the academic comfort zones, be these the established academic disciplines or the reassuring rules for application to a funding agency.

Speaking of this fear of freedom and of the academic comfort zone, it is worth emphasising that 'research activity' is not the same thing as thinking. Way before our 'evaluation culture' emerged, in December 1784 Sir Joshua Reynolds made this point in his Twelfth Discourse:

In the practice of art, as well as in morals, it is necessary to keep a watchful and jealous eye over ourselves; idleness, assuming the specious disguise of industry, will lull to sleep all suspicion of our want of an active exertion of strength. A provision of endless apparatus, a bustle of infinite enquiry and research, or even the mere mechanical labour of copying, may be employed, to evade and shuffle off real labour – the real labour of thinking.

We would now call this 'displacement activity', and this describes my diversionary tactics down to a T – though in 1784 there was no way you could waste a morning searching the web for the latest deals on a digital projector. But it is not always easy to tell when an activity is just playing around or moving an idea along a few inches. So if I would be wary of any research plan that was no more than a flow-chart. You need the occasional crisis, reckless impulse, the courage to ask the embarrassingly naïve question, the courage to be artless.

3 The Visual Continuum: from Digital to Physical

In the third part of this talk I want to think about observation in the process of painting, and allude to what I would call a visual continuum, both a continuum of painting stretching back in time, and a continuum of the world visible to us. Some painters have been ticked off for being naïve in speaking this way, of the innocent, all-absorbing eye, seeing the world as if it were just flat patches of colour like an impressionist painting, or even a film set. And yes, what we see is 'constructed' in one way or another. But it is the one bandwidth where the painter is a true specialist, and does not depend on any other disciplines to ground the research. All evidence here is visual. The text is supplementary, a caption to the experience. So one simple answer to the artefact question has to be that, yes, something like a painting does 'embody knowledge' of some kind when it stands as a supreme example.

Reynolds made the point in that same Discourse:

The daily food and nourishment of the mind of an Artist is found in the great works of his predecessors.

This remains sound advice – rather than reading aesthetics, art theory, research papers, or flicking through online galleries, it is better to look at actual paintings. Or just look out of the window. But to deliver this advice you need to give a lecture, or write a book.

One motivation I have in stressing this comes from the simple thought of what happens if and when I am run down by a bus. I have had several friends who have died in their prime, one a prominent critic, and it is distressing that each time this happens their legacy seems to vanish into thin air. I wish they had had the foresight to condense what they knew into a book, a treatise in the old sense, or a definitive set of works. I am not singling myself out here as a significant contributor, but rather as a witness. Like a number of my colleagues in digital art, some a good deal older than me, our education, and self-education has straddled the low and the high tech worlds. One way or another we have found ways of synthesising areas of expertise – programming and painting, for example – that had little

connection. We have had to find our own way through this maze. There were no institutions representing this, few reference books, and no one had been this way before.

Consciously or unconsciously the 'great works' provide models, and it would be convenient for the artefact as knowledge case if there were some 'great' digital works to add to the Pantheon. There are one or two difficulties: none of us can be sure whether a future generation will succeed in building a convincing fully digital painting format, or whether the existing compromises and mixtures of old and new will prevail; nor is it clear how you balance the different kinds of 'knowledge' involved. You might say the format, the technical expertise is not what we mean here. Or you could say that PhotoShop is an invention, the outcome of massive research, but not itself a research instrument. You could say the same of the development of the concert piano in the nineteenth century. The painter who learns to think fluently within the languages of PhotoShop, Illustrator, Painter and so on, has the opportunity to integrate their painting knowledge into this different instrument – just as composers used the piano as an orchestra, with modifications such as Broadwood's sustaining pedal providing Beethoven's 'cathedral in the living-room'. The best way this integration can be 'researched' is to try it out, to make pictures, make some mistakes, see where the new gadgetry takes you. I cannot see how anyone can argue that you could research 'digital painting' any other way. You cannot look back on something that hasn't yet happened. Of course the 'artefact' comes first.

The routine way of gathering 'visual data' when I was a student was still a sketchbook and a ticket on the Circle Line. With a digital camera, video, a laptop linked to cricket scores as well as paint programs life is a little different, though in my own case I still draw quite a lot. The key perhaps is to think of old and new technologies not competing with one another but complementing each other. I see it as quite reasonable to understand painting as a way of understanding the visible world, maybe from an oblique angle.

Some eight years ago I began – but never completed – a project with BBC News. I could shadow the process of the acquisition, editing, presentation of stories, with the idea that I could produce digital pieces that would go into the new BBC News centre. In explaining the project I found the most useful analogy was to speculate that if Turner was alive, he would be using computer graphics in painting, and just as he was fascinated with speed and light, he might have been fascinated with the phenomenon of a news bulletin. At 6 or 10 o'clock millions of families receive the same messages in their living rooms and kitchens. The newsreader sits alone in a set that is half virtual – the cameras are robotic – like a priest at the altar. It is an extraordinary sensation for an outsider: the cool professionalism of the handful of people at its centre, the millions in their homes – I think of flying over cities at night. It is an extreme example of the process of fast research and the drastic compression of information condensing: everything that happens that day, everywhere, in thirty minutes.

Though the project ran aground, I spent quite some time playing with ideas about compressed spaces, different viewpoints, layers and other computer clichés to see whether this problem could be solved. Ever since I have been sensitive to the difficulty of making a definitive statement of what it is I am looking at. I don't mean this in a theoretical way, but as something felt, even the actual texture of the information, its structure, how much one can be digested in a glance. Any news story has to be framed, cropped, and is a selection from the available information, and indicates a point of view, even a neutral, or 'third person' point of view. This may be basic epistemology, but it is something I had neglected, and something left unresolved in discussions on drawing. When we speak of models, we refer to a fully determined 'out there' model, the life-model, the still life, the

landscape, the found material. But if we follow Ruskin's exercises in Elements of Drawing, and attempt to draw a tree, we don't just pay attention to the type of leaf, but its orientation towards or away from us, its angle, the weight of the branches and so on. It happens that foliage, like hair, is where 3D programmers like to show what they can do. From either point of view it is still a shock when I realise how little I know of each tree in the park.

So I am fascinated by what different groups consider to be authentic evidence. At the Siggraph computer graphics conferences the tree seemed to replace the teapot as the 3D battleground – getting the leaves to follow the sun, the wind, the branches bending with the weight of the extra growth in the spring. There you can also find perceptual psychologists and programmers discussing medieval painting technique, with optical tests to determine how much visual data is required to model the pull of gravity on fabric. After one of these sessions I mentioned to a speaker that I had trouble agreeing with some of the observations, and she said, oh, but I haven't seen these paintings myself, I am relying on the published research data, i.e. other people's observations. In a quite different context I recall an archivist telling me that one of the great problems in his field, medieval documents, was the preponderance of fakes. I teach on an MA Drawing as Process course that I helped to start at Kingston University, and we are nowhere near resolving the question of what it means to be good at drawing. A student pointed out that the only truly individual and authentic mark that any of us can make, that defines and embeds our identity, is a thumbprint. As many have pointed out our observations of nature have become contaminated, contaminated even by animatronic realism. A child next to me in the zoo in New Orleans complained about a perfect living example of an alligator: 'but, dad, it doesn't look real'.

I would like to stick with reptiles and their markings to wind up my remarks here. When I began thinking about this question of 'practice as research' and 'information embedded in artworks' I had this photo of one of our resident frogs at the back of my mind. I am not making a point of this; it just happens this is where my visual research was centred. As an artist with an analytical bent you often examine something quite ordinary with the same attention as a connoisseur checking out a rare drawing by Raphael. Here I want to indicate some of the excitement of closing in on this particular 'research subject'.

I admit this particular project would not have got past any committee: no research context, not much of a methodology, no evidence of collaboration; there is no contribution to knowledge, nor a cutting-edge - apart for the scalpel I used over the two weeks it took to cut the stencil. I had been playing around with this image for some months, realising early on that it needed just three colours, that the white markings were critical, and the image needed to be offset against some contrary setting, and in fact I produced a print. As sometimes happens, a painting that had long been in progress required a radical fix, and I realised that the frog might do the trick. Though the more or less 'abstract' painting had been improvised in a free form way, with some digital assistance, I completed the actual process of deciding the placement of the image, and its precise colour scheme, in the paint program.

The problems of outputting a digital image at a large scale may seem to have been taken care of by inkjet printers, but again I am after a form of integration, making one language stimulate another. In this case the task was to insert a 3' x 2' image of a frog into the 5' square canvas. I used a relatively low-tech stencil. After working out the exact measurements I separated the image into three colours, print it in outline form on four A2 sheets. I lay the ground colour of purple/grey over the required area of the painting. The

four stencils are then cut out, placed on the rectangle of purple, and black and white carefully painted through the stencil.

Why use such a laborious and painstaking process when there are 'instant' solutions available? One answer is simply that the absorption in the process, and the ability to respond to feedback, and the very imperfectability of the process allows for something else to emerge, suggestions that might pass by unnoticed in a more streamlined process. As with peripheral vision, the ethos of the studio still carries within it a kind of trance-like state where you absorb rather than search, a state I like to think of as intense stupidity.

As a painter you do not always know why you choose one image over another, and why you feel it has to be placed just so, and coloured this way. In this case I had already completed a digital print of this idea but had been struck by a peculiarity of the image. It had a series of white speckles running diagonally through it that seemed like artefacts. I actually eliminated them, and then found the image much less interesting. So when I came to work out the large scale oil paint version, I deliberately dropped the mid-tone down so as to accentuate these highlights. I realised that their distribution was something that could not be invented, or even programmed; it was like a star map. And on the frog's nose was a cluster reminiscent of the beautiful constellation of the Pleiades.

PostScript

A thought that keeps circulating in my mind about artefacts and research is one I have mentioned here. The encyclopaedic reach of Google, the ingenuity of the Sims, the entire industry that simulates and animates, all this represents something colossal, something that dwarfs the civilisations of Greece and Rome, a dimension in knowledge that never existed before. Within all this extraordinary network of communications the art of painting still manages to persist, or rather new generations learn about it, and continue trying to renew it. As an art form it is less marginalised than poetry, or jazz, and some painters enjoy celebrity status. In short, it has not become 'old media', obsolescent technology. What drives it forward is not the ever-improving graphics card but the will power of the artist: mind over silicon.

This all too simple thought returned to me after spending much of one week attending conferences, meetings, seminars on research; that is research in university art faculties, where the question is how 'practice' can be dealt with as research. At one small conference there was a session on managing research, a strange subject to raise in what was once an art school priding itself on an informal atmosphere where students could mix with artists, drop round each other's studios, throw ideas about, have heated arguments, and make it up in the pub. I have a book, Artful Making (by Austin and Devin, Prentice Hall) about managing innovation in business, which recommends watching how artists work. So now it comes full circle. Perhaps art departments should research creativity in the boardroom to find out how to make art. The research managers have appeared because universities and colleges are funded according to how they perform in league tables – a kind of academic FT index. The research managers are supposed to help the staff achieve maximum points according to the scoring systems of the auditing commission. So their 'strategy' – or company report - is shaped by the audit as much as by any need for enquiry or spontaneous curiosity. Quite a burden. Sometimes it felt like a seminar on profit enhancement.

The following day I attended a meeting of actual researchers at the AHRB from a wide range of the arts – dancers, novelists, musicians – and many had a digital interest. But

there was other common ground. Most of us felt uncomfortable with this way of framing the arts in terms of such dreadful phrases as 'research outcomes', 'practice-led', 'knowledge transfer', 'supportive environment'. As soon as some of these individuals began showing what they were working on, the meeting came alive - the film-maker Patrick Kieler, for example, who had assembled a DVD with the earliest footage taken in the UK between 1890 and 1910 showing a tram ride through Trafalgar Square.

So in these two days I had seen the two necessary but competing sides of research planning: the management with its euphemisms and database quantifications; the researchers fumbling around in the dark. I had realised acutely the need for freedom, to hang on to the live threads of ideas, to be allowed the freedom to roam. But perhaps this is romantic tosh, and we – the 'researcher/artists' - are just egocentric microbes processing the compost of academic 'output'. I reflected on how easy it was to sidestep the questions of value, how easy it was for a society intent on quantifying 'knowledge transfer', and slotting the arts into that role, simply to go through the motions without achieving anything, to wallow in self-congratulation, to throw up a management system that actually snuffed out precisely the initiatives it was supposed to stimulate.

Had I been completely wrong? One response I had to my talk at the 'Research into Practice' conference was that it was a suicide note for a PhD student. Perhaps it was. I had never taken a PhD, and was initially failed in my MA at the Royal College of Art, and have always battled to limit footnotes in writing, both as a writer, as an editor, and also as a painter. Awareness of the field should be implicit. There has to be more than one way of thinking about what idea, what art, moves us, lifts our souls. I do feel the crunch comes at the point where individuals or organisations are competing for research funds. At that point, yes, you do need a handbook, an 'objective' score-card to make sure the evaluation is as fair as it can be – like others, I have been both sides of the table - but what really counts in 'peer review' are the less tangible factors, such as drive, curiosity. Can you breed and train 'artist researchers', fill them with what some call 'generic PhD research methods'? Up to a point. Do you really want them to be free and independent spirits? Are they primarily RAE fodder? Someone has to decide. Working in this field is quite a skill. Anyway, if my research career comes to an end, so be it.

On a different occasion when I gave a similar talk one research co-ordinator pointed out the absurdity of the 'objective' criteria of art school research speak, the absurdity of using the models of the physical or social sciences when framing research in visual art; the models should come from the humanities, where 'objective truth' is somewhat hedged around with questions of viewpoint and interpretation. It was as if visual art suffered from an inferiority complex, and had to wear a different set of clothes to look respectable. As the critic Peter Schjeldahl pointed out, speaking recently at Tate Modern (Stuart Morgan Memorial Lecture Oct 19 04) of the abomination of artists` statements, as if the works themselves were not the whole point: no one asks a critic or writer to paint a picture of the meaning of what they are saying. More respect for art objects, please.