



Beware the 'Slipperiness of Cognitivism': the concise case for doctoral research through practices in the visual arts.

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Summary- *Crynodeb*

This paper is an extended version of a presentation which addressed the question posed under Strand 'A' of Paradox: The Fine Art European Forum held at the Conway Hall, London, September 2017: Does the PhD research model of contributing new knowledge fit art, where there are no definitive answers and the main strength of the research is its ability to question?, answering in the positive by distinguishing between propositional knowledge, non-propositional knowledge, and understanding. It acknowledges the range of work already published on this question, and distils an aesthetic cognitivist position from which the visual arts are construed as powerful means of deepening our understanding, a source of non-propositional knowledge on a par with, although qualitatively different from, the way that the sciences are construed as the means to propositional knowledge. The terms perceptual intrigue and conceptual intrigue are introduced as values implicit in aesthetic cognitivism. The paper is intended to support and inform research supervisors charged with advocating, research proposals through practices in the visual arts, and those responsible for assessing such proposals, in the context of university cross-disciplinary research degrees committees.

Mae'r papur hwn yn fersiwn estynedig o gyflwyniad a aeth i'r afael â chwestiwn a ofynnwyd o dan Linyn 'A' o Fforwm Ewropeaidd Celfyddyd Gain, Paradox, a gynhaliwyd yn Neuadd Conway, Llundain, Medi 2017: A yw model ymchwil PhD o gyfrannu gwybodaeth newydd yn gweddu i gelfyddyd, pan nad oes unrhyw atebion pendant a phrif gryfder yr ymchwil yw ei allu i gwestiynu?, gan ateb yn gadarnhaol trwy wahaniaethu rhwng gwybodaeth osodiadaol a gwybodaeth anosodiadol, a dealltwriaeth. Mae'n cydnabod yr amrywiaeth o waith a gyhoeddwyd eisoes ar y pwnc hwn, ac yn egluro safbwynt gwybyddol esthetig, lle ystyrir y celfyddydau gweledol yn ddulliau pwerus o ddyfnhau ein dealltwriaeth, sef ffynhonnell o wybodaeth anosodiadol i'w chymharu, er eu bod yn hanfodol wahanol, â'r modd yr ystyrir y gwyddorau yn fodd o sicrhau gwybodaeth osodiadol. Nod y papur yw cefnogi goruchwylwyr ymchwil ac eraill sydd wedi cael y cyfrifoldeb o wneud cynigion ymchwil trwy ymarferion yn y celfyddydau gweledol yng nghyd-destun pwyllgorau graddau ymchwil trawsddisgyblaethol prifysgolion

Key Words: Practice-based research; Visual arts; Types of knowledge and understanding; Perceptual intrigue; Conceptual intrigue; Support for research supervisors.

Preface

The practice and experience of art is as important to man (sic) as the use and knowledge of science. These two great manners of apprehending and enjoying existence are complementary, not hostile. The specific value of art for man is that it is closer to reality than science; that it is not dominated, as science must be, by logic and reason; that it is therefore essentially a liberating activity, while science – for excellent and necessary causes – is a constricting one. Finally and most importantly it is the best, because richest, most complex and most easily comprehensible, medium of communication between human beings.

(Fowles, 1980, p. 174)

The key word is complementary. John Fowles sustains my effort to contribute at least a degree of perspicacity into the argument that the visual arts are as potent a means towards knowledge, understanding and the illumination of human experience as the sciences. I should make it clear at the outset that I am not arguing a separatist case for research through the visual arts, rather I advocate inclusivity: the visual arts on a par with other academic disciplines, albeit with their own research methods and criteria of assessment, just as in other specialisms.

Of course, I am acutely aware of the length, depth and breadth of this ongoing debate, and the high quality and prestige of the many contributors, past and present, (for example, Cazeaux, 2002; Elgin, 2006; Gaut, 2006; Neidderer, 2007; Reilly, 2002) among whom I now find myself.

But the distinguishing feature of my contribution is its attempt to provide a relatively concise overview of the background and structure of the case for the inclusivity of research through visual arts practices at doctoral level in the universities, which I hope will support research supervisors and others charged with advocating – and assessing - the viability of practice-based or practice-led doctoral proposals³ in university research degrees committees.

Introduction

Art...faces a problem, which is how to distil from the ever-changing information in the visual world only that which is important to represent the permanent, essential characteristics of objects...The function of art is thus an extension of the function of the brain – the seeking of knowledge in an ever-changing world. This seems so obvious that it is surprising that the connection has not been made before.

(Zeki, 1999, p. 12)

The genesis of the debate about the status of visual arts practice as research within a UK higher education context can be traced back to 1974, when art schools were first authorised to offer undergraduate degrees. By the end of that century, a Working Group under the auspices of the UK Council of Graduate Education and convened by Professor Christopher Frayling, then Rector of the Royal College of Art, was articulating the position of doctoral research within the art schools:

...the practice-based doctorate advances knowledge partly by means of practice. An original piece of work is included in the submission for examination. It is distinct in that significant aspects of the claim for doctoral characteristics of originality, mastery and contribution to the field are held to be demonstrated through the original creative work. Practice-based doctoral submissions must include a substantial contextualisation of the creative work. This critical appraisal or analysis not only clarifies the basis of the claim for the originality and location of the original work, it also provides the basis of a judgement as to whether general scholarly requirements are met. This could be defined as judgement of the submission as a contribution to knowledge in the field, showing doctoral level powers of analysis and mastery of existing contextual knowledge, in a form which is accessible to and auditable by knowledgeable peers.

(Frayling, 1997, p. 14)

It is clear that the Group was defining a cautious, “situated” position, in Michael Biggs’ and Daniela Buchler’s (2008, p. 5) description of practice-based arts research as integrated within the general academic research community, but one which still required specific guidance for structuring doctoral proposals by candidates with an art school background. Such guidance should emphasise Frayling’s general scholarly requirements, particularly the inclusion of a review of the recognised paradigms of research, the criteria of assessment applicable to each paradigm (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) together with a reasoned argument for the adoption of the chosen paradigm (or mix of paradigms, or for a new one) and the criteria by which the chosen one is justified. After all, the doctorate is a licence to research, it is confirmation of an understanding of the anatomy of the whole research body culminating in an original contribution to knowledge, not simply a demonstration of professional practice.

The Group’s contribution built upon a crucial insight of Nelson Goodman:

...knowing cannot be exclusively or even primarily a matter of determining what is true...Much of knowing aims at something other than true, or any, belief. An increase in acuity of insight or

in a range of comprehension, rather than a change in belief, occurs when...we see...features and structures we could not discern before. Such growth in knowledge is not by formation or fixation of belief but by the advancement of understanding.

(Goodman, 1978, pp. 21-2)

The subtle nuances through which insight, understanding and knowledge are related, as identified by Goodman and elaborated by his erstwhile colleague Catherine Z. Elgin (2002, 2006), serve to support the case for an aesthetic cognitivist position on how arts practices can enhance our understanding – and knowledge - of the world, which advocates an emphasis upon the second of the two main concerns in the general study of Western art which are, firstly, the philosophical traditions of analytic philosophy and existential phenomenology which seek to understand what visual art is³, and secondly, an approach which explores the concept of visual art in terms of its value within social contexts. This latter sociological approach regards the concept of art to be a social construction, and therefore construed according to the specific social context. This position becomes the more appropriate for the analysis and discussion of the potential of research in the visual arts disciplines to yield original contributions to knowledge and understanding within today's cultural context.

Within the sociological tradition, theories aiming to explain value are classed as normative since they attempt to establish a standard, a norm. Gordon Graham (1997, p. 46) reviews three such normative positions: firstly, the idea that the value of art lies in its capacity to give pleasure, aestheticism; secondly, that art's value lies in its abilities to facilitate the expression of emotion, expressivism; and thirdly, that art is valuable as a source of understanding and knowledge, cognitivism.

This paper takes the view that the most socially-useful value of visual arts research lies in its scope for contributing to our understanding of our experiences of the world, without denying the social functions of art practices as a source of pleasure or a means of self-expression.

Consider the values implicit in the term aesthetic cognitivism. Aesthetic value refers to the potential of an artwork to intrigue the eye, to stimulate imagination through the viewer's engagement with the haptic, the proximal and the (illusory) distal values which, in visual terms, are realised through the combination of visual elements to produce perceptions of scale, proportion, pattern, rhythm, contrasts of tone and texture, and illusions of depth; Bridget Riley's oeuvre, and Patrick Hughes' recent series of *Reverspectives* (www.patrickhughes.co.uk) foreground this value. Cognitive value refers to the potential of an artwork to facilitate understanding, to intrigue the brain, to stimulate imagination through the engagement of what Roman Jakobson (1958), in the context of literary studies, called poetic devices, such as metaphor and metonymy, synecdoche, oxymoron and pun; Michael Craig-Martin's (1973) *An Oak Tree*, provoking insights into the nature of representation (and transformation?), Robert Rauschenberg's (1953) *Erased de Kooning Drawing* inviting alternative perspectives on concepts of ownership and authorship, Rachel Whiteread's (1993) *House*, playing with the oxymoron of its inside becoming the outside, are all good examples of such potential. However, note that none of these works cited exhibits a high degree of balance between perceptual intrigue and conceptual intrigue. Could such a criterion - the degree of balance – be of practical relevance in support of aesthetic cognitivism as a means towards the understanding and evaluation of the visual arts? For the purposes of this paper, 'perceptual intrigue' is the product of the tension between the material, textural qualities, the proximal values of the surface of the work, and the illusions of depth perceivable via that surface. The term embraces how the artist's manipulation of the material qualities of the work can stimulate perceptual experiences which cause the viewer's gaze to linger, and perceptual complacencies to be challenged, leading to new understandings. (It should be noted, however, that the notion of perceptual intrigue is not limited to two-dimensional works, and can relate to the tensions set up between spatial scale and proportion in work installed site-specifically; between haptic, distal and proximal values in three-dimensional work in general; between rhythm and pace in time-based audio-visual media). 'Conceptual intrigue' refers to how a work can afford viewers fresh insights which stimulate new understandings of the theme or concept to which it alludes; the capacity of work to employ rhetorical tropes in order to transcend whatever prosaic subject-matter might be represented in the work, so as to make available meanings at a more profound level about our experiences of life, and the human condition in general. (Later in this paper I offer examples of the practice of Robert A. Newell as an example of a high degree of equity between perceptual and conceptual intrigue, affording viewers an understanding of the dichotomy between landscape and environment.)

The aesthetic cognitivist position articulated here echoes the opinion of Goodman (1978, p. 102):

...the arts must be taken no less seriously than the sciences
as modes of discovery, creation, and enlargement of knowledge
in the broad sense of advancement of the understanding, and
thus that the philosophy of art should be conceived as an integral
part of metaphysics and epistemology.

The Problem

The sense of imbalance between the perceived value of the sciences and the arts as sources of knowledge and the advancement of understanding evident in Goodman's wording of forty years ago still resonates today, and is a telling indication of the difficulties faced by those in the art school sector involved in nurturing research through visual art practices, when advocating research proposals within a university context steeped in the definition of knowledge as exclusively propositional, gained through justified true beliefs.

The historical root of the problem

Before specifying the problem in its contemporary guise, it is useful to take a historical view, if only to emphasise the long-standing misunderstanding of the social functions of art, one of which has always been to expand our understanding through the sharing of imaginative constructions of experiences. But the model of art's role in society that has evolved over the last 200 years or so – how it has become aligned with the economic and political values of neoliberalism such as privatisation, de-regulation and competition, instead of maintaining an independence of inquiry - needs rethinking (Jelinek, 2013: 17). As Caroline Tisdall and William Feaver (in Read, 1974, pp. 323-4) explain:

The...model is one made inevitable by the event that founded Western society as we know it, segmented into divided fields of activity: the French Revolution. The bourgeois order set up the academic system that was to divorce one field of life from another, to separate scientific analysis from philosophical speculation, technology from science and science from art.

The separation of science and technology from art was the mind-set driving the network of Government Schools of Design set up in 1842 to produce designers who, it was envisioned, would add visual value to the mass-produced output of the manufacturing industries which were proliferating at that time, thus stimulating the 'desire to acquire' so essential in a mass-production/mass-consumption economy. However, by 1849 it was apparent that the Schools of Design were not fulfilling their intended purpose, but were attracting instead students desiring to maintain a cohesion between design and technological skills and the fine arts, and so, following a Parliamentary Select Committee, Henry Cole was appointed director of the reconstituted schools which became known as Schools of Art, with an added remit as "...centres of instruction for public education in drawing." (Macdonald, 1973: 91). Prior to 1961, when the Diploma in Art & Design (DipAD) was introduced to replace the National Diploma in Design (NDD) which had been in operation since 1946, provincial art schools were, in the main, preparing students for professional practices. 'Research' was not on the agenda, 'outputs' were generally artefacts made for exhibition, or the results of craft and design activities related to local traditions and requirements. The shift towards Polytechnic structures in the late 1960s (typically, amalgamations of regional technical colleges, teacher-training colleges and art colleges) and the re-classifying of the DipAD as the Bachelor of Arts (BA) degree in 1974, meant that those art schools who desired national recognition (the alternative was parochial oblivion!) found themselves on an academic par with the other disciplines.

The problem in its present-day guise

Since 1992, when Further and Higher Education Acts re-branded the Polytechnics as new universities, this parity has been brought under closer scrutiny. The staff of the previously 'non-academic' training programmes - Sally Findlow (2012, p. 118) lists nursing, physiotherapy, social work, teaching and business studies, I would add art and design – now find themselves in an uncomfortable position: as Findlow (2012,

p. 118) observes, "...in addition to 'non-traditional' students, higher education institutions... are now staffed by large numbers of 'non-traditional' lecturers for whom assuming an academic identity..." (with its concomitant responsibilities for articulating, demonstrating and developing the theoretical bases of their pedagogies, as well as engaging in research activities distinct from normal professional practice) "...can be problematic."

That's not the full extent of their problems (see Ben Martin's 2016 article for a comprehensive review): today, those staff are also charged with a range of administrative imperatives imposed by their institutions' managers competing alongside the older established universities in a commercial environment, including responsibilities for the recruitment and retention of students, the monitoring of student attendance, even of the activities and movements of their overseas students on behalf of the visa authorities, all in the context of...

...multi-dimensional markets (national and international students, research, enterprise), they (staff) are required to maintain solvency and comply with national benchmarks and legal frameworks, to produce high quality research work, keep student consumers happy, produce good graduates—the list of imperatives grows. (Findlow, 2012, p. 118).

Changes in the structuring of UK higher education affecting the art schools, culminating in their being incorporated within the university sector by 1992, (and thereafter eligible for inclusion in the national research assessment exercises, RAE 1996, 2001, 2008, and the research excellence framework, REF 2014, 2021), have revealed the historical confusion over the status of research in the visual arts as a means of contributing to knowledge and understanding.

This confusion has been exacerbated because university research regulations remain vague about what knowledge and understanding mean in the context of the visual arts, whilst tacitly prioritising propositional knowledge, generally assumed to involve "...justified true belief..." (Gettier, 1963), over other types of knowledge. Kristina Niedderer (2007a, pp. 5-6) has shown that this understanding of propositional knowledge is...

...implicit in the definition of research because of additional requirements such as the textual/written presentation of an intellectual position (proposition, thesis – 'true belief'), because of the logic of verification and defence of this intellectual position through argument and evidence (justification), and the requirement for generalisability/transferability and explicit and unambiguous communication.

However, whilst virtually all theorists agree that true belief is a necessary condition for propositional knowledge, there is a longstanding refutation of the condition of justification, as demonstrated by Edmund Gettier (1963), famous in Anglo-American epistemology for his article – all of three pages! – attacking the tripartite definition of knowledge. This defines 'S knows that p' as:

p is true
S believes that p
S's belief that p is justified

Gettier showed that this definition is insufficient, he argued that one's true belief might be justified in a way that depends too much on chance: for example, consider an analogue clock which is normally accurate but happens to have stopped, and an observer who reads it at one of the two precise moments in 24 hours when it shows the correct time. In such a case, the reader has true belief which is justified, but is not knowledge. (Dancy, 1995, p. 312).

So it would be safer to regard the theoretical basis of propositional knowledge as a means towards generalised abstractions – rich though they may be – rather than as the exclusive means to a deeper understanding of the world and our relationships within it.

The historical prioritisation of propositional knowledge has excluded the kinds of knowledge associated with practice, which have variously been called 'practical', 'personal', 'procedural' or 'tacit' knowledge - most popular in recent writings is the term 'experiential' knowledge – all of which I shall include under the collective term non-propositional.

The Hypothesis

Could an elaboration of the terms 'knowledge' and 'understanding' resolve the misunderstandings that occur between academic research disciplines in their common quest for...knowledge and understanding?

Types of Knowledge

The disciplines tussle for authority, assuming the supremacy of their methodology, the precision of their language or the truth of their knowledge. We favour whichever knowledge set, methodology or language we learned as undergraduates.

(Jelinek, 2013, p. 126)

Traditionally, cognition was regarded as the domain of thought and inference, contrasted with perceptual experiences. But more recently, it is understood to span conscious events such as seeing, as well as thinking and reasoning:

The domain of cognitive theory is broader than the realm of the propositional attitudes, regarded by many philosophers as the space of reasons. Cognitive states lying beyond the space of reasons will not be governed by the norms of rationality which tell us what we ought to think, given what we believe, and what we ought to do, given our intentions and desires.

(Smith, 1995, p. 138)

Berys Gaut (2006, p. 115), as an exemplar of the aesthetic cognitivist position, confirms the nomenclature of different kinds of knowledge, identified as part of the problem earlier, and which research in the visual arts can impart:

...most cognitivists correctly hold that there is a wide variety of different kinds of knowledge that art can impart to its appreciators: propositional knowledge, know-how (skills), phenomenal knowledge (knowledge of what it is like to experience something), conceptual knowledge, knowledge of values and of significance, for example.

Notice here that the term cognitivist embraces not only propositional knowledge resulting in truths (justified or not) derived from the scientific method² of inquiry - what Gilbert Ryle (1949) called 'knowing that' - but also what has come to be adopted, problematically it now seems, as an antonym to cognition; experiential knowledge, (Ryle's 'knowing how'). Much well-intentioned effort has been expended in the attempt to legitimise those types of knowledge mentioned by Gaut as alternatives to the propositional knowledge assumed to be derived from the scientific method of research. But the resultant perceived split only serves to divide the research community, leaving practice-based or practice-led visual arts research in the position identified by Biggs and Buchler as isolationist.

Here is the nub of the confusion outlined in the problem identified earlier: experiential knowledge (and its variations) is not inimical to cognitive knowledge. Rather, it is a sub-set of cognitivism, non-propositional, and which delivers understanding, as valuable and socially-useful as propositional true beliefs.

Indeed, Christoph Baumberger (2013, p. 62) argues that

...an epistemology of understanding is better suited than a theory of knowledge to do justice to the cognitive achievements of science, philosophy and the everyday; and that such an epistemology can and should accommodate a wide range of cognitive functions of artworks and provides a suitable epistemological framework for aesthetic cognitivism.

Hence my title, the “slipperiness of cognitivism”, to borrow Peter Lamarque’s (2006, p. 129) phrase. Whilst recognising that propositional knowledge delivers true beliefs, Lamarque also points out that non-propositional knowledge can be derived from “exploring aspects of experience” or “imagining possibilities”. It should be noted here that both kinds of knowledge are derived from cognitive procedures, and are complementary: no clear opposition is implied between the two.³

Art as a Means to Knowledge through Understanding

We can know more than we can tell.

(Polanyi, 1983, p. 8)

Much of our everyday experiences consists of encounters through language: notoriously arbitrary in terms of its relation to its referents and in the myriad of meanings deferred but exposed in its deconstructions, language is at once the source of our deepest illusions and our highest perspicacity. But we can also make sense of the world by applying a method of visual interpretation – imaginative interpretation, as Graham (1997, p. 57) puts it. In much the same way as we are not all blessed with an acute sense of scientific logic, so we are not all blessed with powers necessary to negotiate the nuances of language, which is where the visual arts and artists find a significant role in the augmenting of ways of knowing:

Works of art can supply the imaginative appreciation of experience...and their value derives from the fact that we may ourselves be deficient in this regard. This is the sense in which art is a source of understanding.

(Graham, 1997, p. 58)

We do not need to be limited by the scientific quest for confirmation of a measurable equivalence between our experience of the world and the material world itself; we do not need to be subject to the arbitrariness of language: visual art is another means to understanding, through which we may look in order to construe realities afresh. But just as the sciences require a degree of numeracy through which we can glean the understandings they offer, and the humanities require of us a degree of literacy in order to access their insights, so the visual arts require of us a degree of...visuality⁴, in order to construe the fresh perceptions they offer. I first tentatively proposed *visuality* some time ago (Riley, 2002, p. 150) as being appropriate to identify the human faculty older than both numeracy and literacy – after all, archaeological evidence (e.g. Davidson & Noble, 1989; Hoffman et al., 2018) proves that we were drawing long before we were writing or counting! Since then my case for such an invented term has been strengthened by W. J. T. Mitchell’s (2008, p. 11) advocacy. The neologism refers to the distinct capacity of the human mind that Bruce Archer, when Professor of Design Research at the Royal College of Art (RCA), identified as “analogous with the language capacity and the mathematical capacity for cognitive modelling” (Archer & Roberts, 1979). Deanna Petherbridge (1991), who was Professor of Drawing at the RCA, has commented that “Drawing is the primal means of symbolic communication, which predates and embraces writing, and functions as a tool of conceptualisation parallel with language.”

As an example of how exploring aspects of experience and imagining possibilities through the medium of drawing can advance our understanding of our relationships with the world, consider the work produced by Robert A. Newell⁵ (2005) for his practice-based PhD submission to the University of Wales, subsequently featured in the exhibition *Forms of Endurance and Change*:

We are made aware from Newell’s thesis about fundamental forces which form our shared physical world of land, sea and sky. We are invited to explore the shared psychological tensions which underlie the oxymoronic constancy of change, the constant process of transformation of which we are too often unaware. These paintings and drawings show the fascinating effects of that process, and afford us some understanding – knowledge – of our relationship with our physical surroundings because they challenge us to resolve the tension between the concepts of an objective landscape and a subjective environment. In Newell’s (2012, p. 3) words: “Painting and drawing are integral to an extended perceptual process that mediates the relationship between subject and object”. Look at these paintings and drawings: are we gazing over a landscape outside ourselves, or are we positioned within an environment, symbiotically-linked to our surroundings? Newell argues that perspective – the geometric projection system – actually serves to draw the viewer in to the picture, and if you look at the drawing *Great Asby Scar I* (Figure 1) in

particular, you'll see what he means: we are afforded a much deeper insight even than that offered by Richard Wollheim's (1991, p. 105) twofoldness, (in his sense of simultaneously perceiving the surface qualities and the illusory depths of space of the drawing itself), we are offered a visual understanding of our twofold relationship with the space we inhabit: how we are a part of it, and simultaneously apart from it, derived from the projective geometry of the drawing and how that compositional structure positions the viewer. Paul Klee, paraphrased by Arthur C. Danto (1991, p. 211), noted that "...art need not simply render the visible, but renders visible, which means that we see by means of art something not to be seen in other ways, something in effect that must be made visible". Here's the heart of Newell's drawings' intrigue, an intrigue worth exploring, on the two levels discussed earlier: the perceptual, and the conceptual.



Figure 1. Robert Newell Great Asby Scar I. Graphite pencil and watercolour on paper, 48.9x78.8cm.

Look again: do they intrigue your eyes? Yes! A more interesting question is: how? Every one of the individual marks, and every combination of those marks at whatever level we choose to engage with these works, offers drawn visual equivalents for the natural phenomena in which our being is immersed yet rarely consciously experienced – land, sea, sky and their interactions with light. The visual psychologist James Jerome Gibson (1966, p. 238) had no doubt what artists are for: "The legitimate endeavour of working artists is to practise the art of structuring light". Practising the art of structuring light is exactly what Newell does. Notice how at every level of illusory depth in the picture plane, from foreground to background, the scene depicted is in focus, edges are sharp. Now, this is not the way our natural perception system works. We are only able to focus on one plane at a time (if you doubt this, try the two fore-fingers test: hold them in line, one close to your eyes, the other at arm's length: focus upon the nearer finger, and note the double image of the further finger?) This play on focus, by the way, is the source of that eerie, hyper-real, if not surreal quality of many of these rock-scapes. (See Great Asby Scar II, Figure 2)

So, if these drawings and painting are not records of natural perception, as Ernst Gombrich (1960) mistakenly defined drawing, then what are they? These drawings are, in Newell's (2013) words, "...a synthesis of temporal looking..." They represent time, as well as space: lengthy periods of time spent focussing on each individual surface and edge, time spent gradually building an understanding of structure beyond our reality of perception, a shareable understanding. Speaking of structure, notice the double structure apparent in Limestone Cliffs, Caim (Figures 3 and 4), the Coldstream-esque pencil grid (meticulously made, sometimes with the aid of a spirit-level) mapping an underlying structure and thus affording the viewer an understanding of order underpinning the apparent chaos of disintegrating matter.



Figure 2. Robert Newell Great Asby Scar II. Oil on canvas, 106.7x152.5cm.

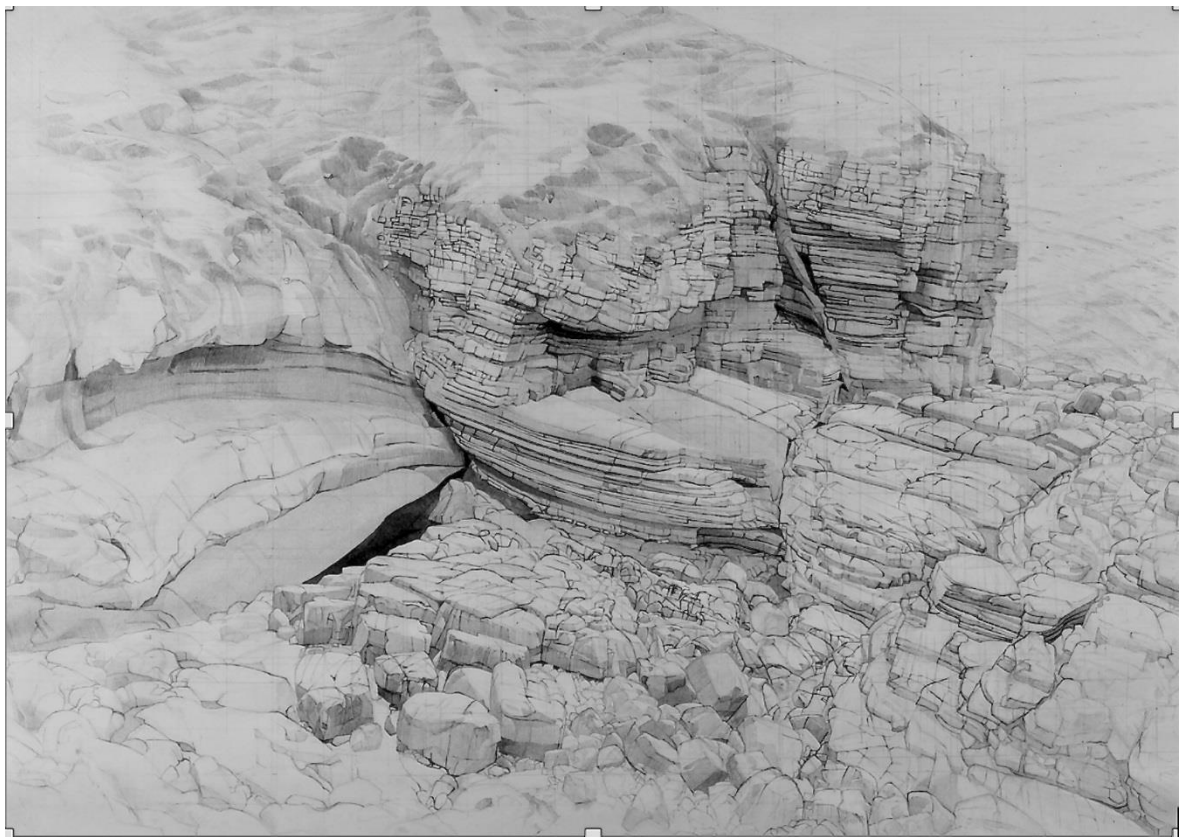


Figure 3. Robert Newell Limestone Cliffs, Caim. Graphite pencil and watercolour on paper, 53.3x73.6cm.

Such drawings that reveal their construction process are a source of understanding unattainable by other reprographic means. (At the risk of offending the photographers, this is one aspect that makes drawing more interesting than photography!)

Newell's research allows us insights to a range of perceptions of the world by over-riding our biological constraints: the familiar is made strange, to paraphrase Russian Formalist theorist Viktor Shklovsky (1917).

What about the second kind of intrigue I mentioned? Do these drawings and paintings intrigue your brain? Yes! How? Because so long as we are willing to be engaged – what Jakobson (1958) called the conative function of communication – we cannot fail to connect with an awesome concept: the ever-changing but hardly perceptible erosion of what Newell has called 'the bones of the land', under ever-changing lighting conditions, conceptually resonates - an appropriate Gibsonian notion - in the equivalent erosion of paper texture by the pencil's graphite grit or the abrasion of brush bristles against canvas weave. To paraphrase Kant (1790): "The fluid is to all appearances, older than the solid..." These works are about material on the move! So we have a balance between perceptual intrigue and conceptual intrigue, such achievement moves beyond the subject-matter to reveal something more universal – "to reveal... the universal in the particular" in Lamarque's (2006: 131) words, and that is surely the hallmark of quality, the doorway to understanding and knowledge. As Peter Goldie (2007, pp. 166-7) argues:

There is a kind of cognitive value that many good conceptual artworks possess. These works can help us to think about certain difficult philosophical ideas. This is their cognitive value. So an artwork's being of cognitive value isn't restricted to its yielding knowledge in the form of propositional knowledge, of justified true beliefs. It can also be cognitively valuable in that it facilitates knowledge, and enhances our intellectual dispositions. This broader conception of cognitive value...helps us to explain an important fact: we can return to those artworks time after time and continue to find cognitive value in them, and this could not be explained if all they yielded were propositional knowledge.

Summary

With regard to research policy (regulations and requirements), it would be important to acknowledge the existence and importance of non-propositional/tacit knowledge, how it can be included under current requirements, and how research results can be communicated inclusive of its tacit component to facilitate application in practice.

(Niedderer, 2007, p. 12)

Until such time as universities' research policies specify regulations and requirements governing practice-based research in the visual arts, this paper is offered as an attempt to provide research supervisors charged with advocating doctoral research proposals involving an aspect of visual arts practice, and those responsible for assessing such proposals, with a concise framework from which to argue their viability for "...contributing original knowledge and understanding in the field(s) of study concerned" (Frayling 1997:9) within a multi-disciplinary academic research environment such as a university.

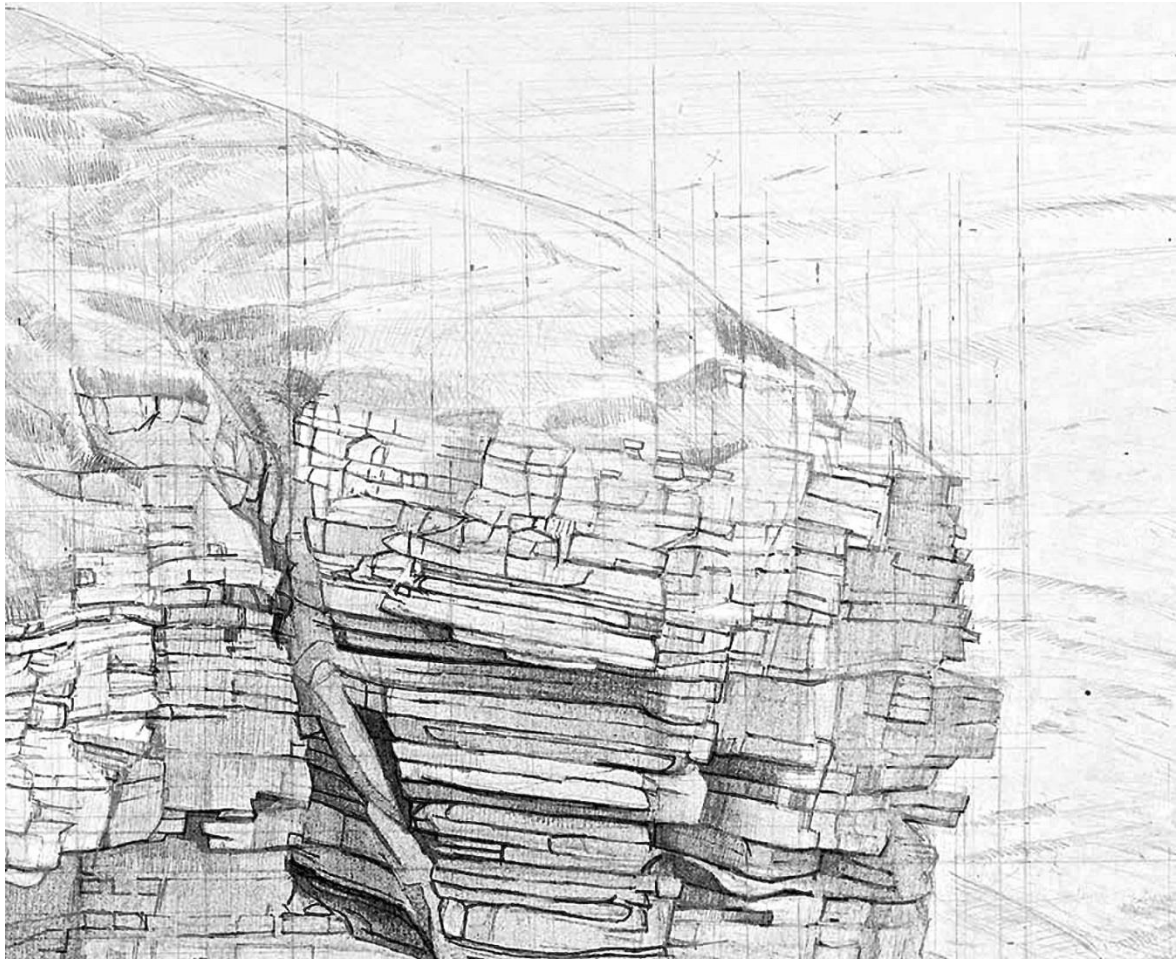


Figure 4. Robert Newell Limestone Cliffs, Cain (detail).

Endnotes

1. The *Journal of Visual Arts Practice* editorial policy offers this clarification: "If a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge, the research is practice-based. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice-led". <https://www.researchgate.net/project/Journal-of-Visual-Art-Practice-published-by-Taylor-and-Francis>. (Accessed 15 May 2017). 2 Among the activities often identified as characteristic of science are: systematic observation and experimentation, inductive and deductive reasoning, and the formation and testing of hypotheses and theories. How these are carried out in detail can vary greatly, but characteristics like these have been looked to as a way of demarcating scientific activity from non-science. www.plato.stanford.edu (Accessed 20 April 2017)
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3. Paul Crowther (2013, p. 2) posits a "methodological bridge" between the two strands of the philosophical tradition of relevance to the acquisition of knowledge, mentioned earlier as analytic philosophy and existential phenomenology, arguing for a 'post-analytic phenomenology' which might alleviate the false dichotomy perceived between propositional and non-propositional knowledge at the core of misunderstandings experienced in research degrees committees. He cites Richard Wollheim's (1987) *Painting as an Art* as an example of the analytic philosophy position with a phenomenological emphasis, and as such, a useful bridge between the two.

4. James Elkins (2008, pp. 1-2) notes the term "...visual literacy has been in uncommon but intermittent use for over a hundred and fifty years", and reports a definition as "...understanding how people perceive objects, interpret what they see, and what they learn from them." My neologism, visualcy, embraces not only this sense of understanding, but also the facility for producing the means to understanding through the articulation of visual elements in the construction of images. This more pro-active definition is in line with Cheryl Lemke's (2003, p. 15) acknowledgement of the demands of the expanded field of the digital age: she describes visual literacy as "The ability to interpret, use, appreciate, and create images and video using both conventional and 21st century media in ways that advance thinking, decision making, communication, and learning". Ways of nurturing this ability, which I have described as an intelligence of seeing, are offered in Riley (2008) and Rankin, Riley (et al. 2017).
5. I'm grateful to Dr Newell for his permission to use illustrations of his paintings and drawings. Rob has been friend and colleague during and since our time teaching at the Swansea College of Art. His work can be seen at: www.robertnewellartist.co.uk

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