Visual Studies 2

Understanding Visual Culture
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Course written by: Dr Jaimini Patel

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Introduction

Welcome to Understanding Visual Culture 2.

In this course you will develop and build on the knowledge and skills that you acquired in UVC 1. You will look at the different kinds of relationships that contemporary artists have with writing and how it affects, positions and contextualises their practice. Through an examination of artists working globally across a range of disciplines, you will explore a variety of texts that engage with their work and the discussions around it. Writing about art can take many forms, it can be: a conversation between artists/art historians/critics/curators, a review, a publication accompanying an exhibition, an artist’s statement or manifesto or a creative response to the work. Writing/text is used to indicate dialogues in different forms that use words, and include interviews/discussions.

The text might belong to the category of art history, theory, criticism, philosophy, anthropology, aesthetics or it might be more difficult to define using such terms. It can seem like text attempts to contain, make sense of and fix the activity of art, which can be untidy, unwieldy, contradictory or deliberately ambiguous. Writing is a form in itself that has its own craft and you may want to think about how this affects the artwork that is being discussed. How do the personal and creative aspirations the writer has for the text contribute to the work? There are forms of writing that engage with the work in innovative ways, adding insights and new approaches to it. So, rather than focusing on the significance of the categories to which the texts belong, you will consider how these contributions can be meaningful to artists. How do they affect and influence your practice and how do they enable you to understand it and articulate it to others?

You will be introduced to a diversity of voices and approaches that will enable you to examine some of the concerns that artists may face at the start of their career or indeed, throughout it. Through the themes that emerge, you will become familiar with some of the prevailing debates that have emerged in recent decades. As you observed in Understanding Visual Culture 1, art lost its autonomy as a self-contained entity and entered the physical and social space of the viewer. It could no longer maintain a distance from the viewer who had to now be considered as a thinking, feeling, flesh and blood body, moving through time and space amongst the work. The way in which this work is engaged with and critically addressed has therefore also changed.

The exercises and assignments in this course will require a number of written and studio responses, with a roughly 50/50 balance across the course, but this may vary in each part with some being more weighted towards practice and others to theory – some of the work in the studio will be practical and some will involve reflection and analysis. You may be asked to work in new ways that could add to your process in the studio and take it in new directions or could help you to recognise more clearly the type of work you want to make or don’t want to make. Try to be open to experimenting and challenging your assumptions. Sometimes, being uncomfortable and uncertain can lead to unanticipated developments. You might want to continue to work in your preferred medium in your studio practice or you could choose to try others.
The aim of the course is to introduce you to different texts that can be relevant to you as an artist and can help you to build a closer relationship with text. For instance, if identity is something that underpins your work, it may be useful for you to explore particular texts and ideas in relation to your practice. If it is not relevant, you will be more informed about the work of artists that do deal with it. It is good practice to be able to engage with work that is different to your own, as it helps you to understand the wider context that your work sits within.

In order to introduce you to a wide range of voices and registers, there are a number of links to different sources. These are presented as opportunities to do further research in the field beyond the minimum course requirements. If you find a link that is broken, please use this as an opportunity to research a particular source yourself, or if unavailable, find a suitable alternative.

You will be introduced to a variety of short texts, some that you will be guided through in-depth, others that will be offered more like a taster for ideas that whet your appetite. It is possible that an essay from a particular author or anthology resonates with your work and you may become compelled to read the rest of the book. This might lead you to discover other texts that could become important to your studio work. Texts can affect your practice just as your practice can affect what you read and perhaps write yourself. Depending on the kind of work you make, you may even develop a practice of writing that helps you to understand what happens in the studio. Writing can help you to work things out, in the same way, that your studio practice does.

Do not be put off if you feel like there are parts of a text that you find difficult to grasp; take from it what you can. There are suggestions for a range of texts (in terms of difficulty and length) for further reading. These can introduce you to different voices if you wish to explore the topic in more depth. Think about the overall argument and how it is relevant to you rather than getting bogged down by a term or concept that you are not familiar with. Discussing a text with someone is a really good way to understand how someone else approaches it and working out what it means to you. You could also create your own glossary of the new terms that you learn throughout the course. The wider aim of the course is to show that there is no right way to understand an artwork or text and to enable you to gain confidence in your ability to interrogate and analyse your own and others' responses. Artists often read texts in new and interesting ways. The information presented in this course is by no means definitive but aims to generate questions and initiate an open-ended enquiry.

Please read through the whole course before you begin and use your learning log and sketchbooks/notebooks/developmental process work throughout the course as they will help you to see how your ideas change and develop and also help you to think about how you approach the assignments. Be creative about the different ways in which you show your thinking.
Parallel Project

In addition to working on the course materials you will work on the Parallel Project which is a self-directed, extended project. This is an opportunity to pursue independent research in an area or topic of your own choosing. The focus of this project is entirely up to you, although you are advised to use the ideas and approaches explored within the course exercises as a springboard to inspire your thinking and making process. You may work in the studio as well as in text based formats for your Parallel Project.

Getting started

If you haven’t already done so, now is a good time to work through the free introductory course ‘An Introduction to Studying in HE’. This is available on the OCA student website.

Don’t be tempted to skip this introductory course as it contains valuable advice on study skills (e.g. reading, note-taking), research methods and academic conventions which will stand you in good stead throughout your studies.

The OCA website will be a key resource for you during your studies with OCA, so take some time to familiarise yourself with it. Log onto the OCA student website and find the video guide to using the website. Watch the video and take some notes.

Remember, there are other students following this course, so you are not on your own. Use the online forums to reflect on your findings and discuss issues with other students.

Course aims

The aim of this course is to help you:

• Foster an understanding of different theoretical and conceptual strands of critical debate relating to art practice.

• Introduce you to a wide range of writing and the ability to apply analytical techniques in study skills.

• Enable you to evaluate and analyse visual and textual material in relation to art practice and your area(s) of study and studio practice.

• To introduce you to key texts, critical and theoretical concepts, methodologies and strategies relating to art practice and applying these to your creative work.

• To foster, and analyse the relationship of practical work to theoretical study through a body of work.
Learning outcomes

On successful completion of this course, you’ll be able to:

- Identify relevant and appropriate sources of information and application to the visual and textual analysis of art.

- Critically evaluate, analyse and synthesise appropriate critical and theoretical texts in the context of studio practice.

- Demonstrate a range of research skills, methodologies and understanding of the relevant forms and modes of information, including textual and electronic.

- Demonstrate an appropriate understanding and application of theoretical and critical research methodologies to the analysis and evaluation of areas of art practice and practical work.

- Critically analyse the relationship of practical work to theoretical study through a body of work.

Your tutor

Your tutor is your main point of contact with OCA. Before you start work, make sure that you’re clear about your tuition arrangements. The OCA tuition system is explained in some detail in your Student Handbook.

If you haven’t already done so, please write a paragraph or two about your experience to date. Add background information about anything that you think may be relevant for your tutor to know about you (your profile) – for example, your experience of Understanding Visual Culture II so far, your reasons for starting this course and what you hope or expect to achieve from it. Email or post your profile to your tutor as soon as possible. This will help him or her understand how best to support you during the course.

Arrange with your tutor how you’ll deal with any queries that arise between assignments. This will usually be by email or phone.

Make sure that you label any work that you send to your tutor with your name, student number and the assignment number. Your tutor will get back to you as soon as possible after receiving your assignment but this may take a little time. Continue with the course while you’re waiting.

Note that you’re encouraged to reflect carefully on feedback and, if appropriate, to go back to the assignment you submitted and make adjustments to it based on your tutor’s comments. If you submit for assessment, making such adjustments demonstrates responsiveness and learning and will help improve your mark.
Formal assessment

Read the section on assessment in your Student Handbook at an early stage in the course. See also the study guide on assessment and getting qualified for detailed information about assessment and accreditation. You’ll find this on the OCA student website.

For assessment, you’ll need to submit a cross-section of the work you’ve done on the course, ensure you discuss what you will submit with your tutor in good time, and before you reach the final assignment of the course.

Only work done during the course should be submitted to your tutor or for formal assessment.

Pre-assessment review

If you decide to have your work formally assessed, you’ll need to spend some time at the end of the course preparing your finished work for submission. How you present your work to the assessors is of significant importance as it does reflect the care that you have taken with your work. You’ll find more information about the pre-assessment review in Part Six of this course guide.

Assessment criteria

The assessment criteria are central to the assessment process for this course, so if you’re going to have your work assessed to gain formal credits, please make sure you take note of these criteria and consider how each of the assignments you complete demonstrates evidence of each criterion. On completion of each assignment, and before you send your assignment to your tutor, test yourself against the criteria – in other words, do a self-assessment, and see how you think you would do. Note down your findings for each assignment you’ve completed in your writing diary, noting all your perceived strengths and weaknesses, taking into account the criteria every step of the way. This will be helpful for your tutor to see, as well as helping you prepare for assessment. The five assessment criteria are evenly weighted and are listed below.

- Presentation and technical correctness – Grammatical accuracy, punctuation, layout, spelling, awareness of literary conventions, and the ability (where appropriate) to play with these conventions and fit them to your needs.

- Language – Its appropriateness to genre, subject matter, and characters. Avoidance of cliché, employment of a wide vocabulary, awareness of the rhythmic powers of language, and an ability to make appropriate use of imagery. Above HE level 4 (i.e. OCA Levels 2 and 3), we are looking for the development of an individual voice.

- Creativity – Imagination, experimentation, inventive exploration of subject matter, originality, and empathy.

- Contextual knowledge – Evidence of reading, research, critical thinking and reflection. Engagement with contemporary thinking and practice in the specific genre (i.e. scriptwriting).
• Craft of writing – Technical competence in your chosen genre (in scriptwriting areas such as characterisation, plotting, dialogue, use of literary devices like narration).

Your learning log

The learning log is an integral element of every OCA course. If this is your first course with OCA, you’ll find guidance on what to include in a learning log and how to set up an online learning log/blog on the OCA student website.

You’re strongly recommended to use an online log instead of (or in addition to) a physical learning log. A log is effective to consolidate and present your work, findings, observations and reflections for your tutor and peers to review. You can also include links to new research sources you’ve found so that these are available to your fellow students.

Plan ahead

This Level 5 course represents 600 hours of learning time. Allow around 20% of this time for reflection and keeping your writing diary. The course should take about a year to complete if you spend around 12 hours each week on it.

As with all OCA courses, these course materials are intended to be used flexibly but keep your tutor fully informed about your progress. You’ll need to allow extra time if you decide to have your work formally assessed.

Understanding Visual Culture II is divided into six parts, corresponding to the six-course assignments. The first assignment will enable your tutor to get to know you, review your work so far and decide how best to help you in future.

Each part of the course addresses a different issue or topic and is separated into a series of projects designed to tackle the topic in bite-sized chunks. As well as information and advice, each project offers research, reading and exercises to encourage writing. The exercises slowly build up into the assignments that you’ll send to your tutor.

The assignments offer flexibility as to style and content and are designed to help you develop your own creative style and voice. Each assignment will consist of either written or studio-based work that reflects on the reading, thinking and exercises undertaken in each part.
Reading

A reading list for the course is available at the end of this course guide and on the OCA website. The reading list recommends key texts and gives suggestions for further reading. Record your thoughts, reactions and critical reflections on your reading in your learning log; this will be helpful when you come to work on your critical review. The online reading list on the OCA website is updated regularly, so check this for recently published recommendations.

A useful reference book to introduce you in more depth to the critical terms mentioned in the course:

Audio archives of artists interviews:
British artist William Furlong in 1972 founded the art magazine, Audio Arts: https://www.tate.org.uk/audio-arts/volumes (15/07/18)

Polish artist Marysia Lewandowska in 1883 founded the Women’s Audio Archive: http://www.marysialewandowska.com/waa/index.php (17/07/18)

Referencing your reading

Whenever you read something that you might want to refer to in your projects and assignments, get into the habit of taking down the full reference to the book, article or website straight away. You must fully reference any other work that you draw on if you plan to go for a formal assessment. To do this you should use the Harvard system of referencing – see the Harvard referencing system guide on the OCA website. Getting down the full reference at the time will save you the frustration of having to hunt for the details of a half-remembered reference long after the event. Referencing other people’s work accurately will also help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.

Considerations and approaches for this course

During the course you will develop the critical and research skills that you acquired in UVC1. It is important to bear in mind that UVC1 is a theory course, whereas UVC2 examines the relationship between theory and practice. In the context of Fine Art practice, the nature of research is not prescriptive or brief-led, but a lifelong evolving process. When you are asked to research an artist, their work, a text or a concept, think about what it means for you, how it influences your thinking, your studio practice and what does it lead you to research further.

As you progress through the course, independent research will be encouraged. Rather than exercises and research points leading you to specific outcomes or knowledge, you will be encouraged to source material and understand and extract from them what you consider to be meaningful or important. This may seem daunting at first, but as you progress, you will develop confidence in finding your own voice and placing your practice within some of the larger debates introduced.
Research points, Reading points and Further reading

Research/Reading points:

There are many Research/Reading points throughout the course. These are an opportunity for you to undertake more independent research in order to expand and enrich your understanding of the course material. Some of them will lead to written or practical tasks, while others may not. You are encouraged to use these points to feedback into the Exercises, Assignments and Parallel Project. You may also choose to develop your own response to them if they are particularly relevant to your studio practice. Please record these in your learning log.

Further research:

This research is optional and you are encouraged to undertake as much as you can, in order to expand your learning experience and feedback into the Exercises, Assignments and Parallel Project.
Part One: Practice

Eline McGeorge, *Spaces Fold, Companions Meet*, canvas stretcher, 180 x 175 cm, 2015, Image courtesy of Hollybush Gardens.
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**Practice Introduction**

‘It takes time, “it” being a kind of recognition of ease between myself and the proposed work, or the debris of try-outs, results of the desperate need to engage with physical stuff, without any clear idea of what to do.’

Barlow, 2004:83

The first part of Understanding Visual Culture will explore the idea of practice through three topics: idea and reality, art and life, and action as habit, method, rule. These feed into your first assignment that asks you to perform and document a repetitive task or activity over a period of time. Please remember to add any new terms to your glossary which you can refer to as a tool as it builds throughout the course.

Practice or praxis has been an important concept for philosophers, which continues to endure. In ancient Greece, Aristotle proposed that there were three basic activities that humans take part in: theoria (thinking/theory), poiesis (making/producing), and praxis (acting/doing). German-born American philosopher and political theorist Hannah Arendt argues in her book The Human Condition that Western philosophy focuses on the contemplative life and neglects the active life, which has led to philosophical ideas becoming abstract and irrelevant within everyday life. For Arendt, praxis is the highest and most important level of the active life and she posits that our capacity to analyse ideas, grapple with them, and engage in praxis is what makes us uniquely human. For the ancient Greeks, in contrast to poiesis, praxis indicated an action that was considered to be valuable in itself. It had an ‘ethical dimension concerned with self-shaping or a decision as to how to live, as well as a political dimension concerned with the form in which one lived with other people.’ (Boon, Levine, 2018:13) Whereas, poiesis refers to activities that are a means to an end or goal. The differentiation of human activity in this way is not observed in non-Western traditions. In Western culture, practice can be applied to political, educational, spiritual and medical spheres.

Within an art context, it is common to talk about an ‘artist’s practice’ rather than their ‘work’. Critics argue that this development is a way to professionalise what artists do and shifts the focus from the outcome to the process. However, increasingly it is the case that artists no longer produce an artwork as a singular entity, but are involved in the wide range of activities that constitute the work. In this part you will examine the relationships between thinking, making and acting, and the ways in which art practice has expanded and diversified from the studio and craft-based activities to the social realm, the material to the immaterial, and from individual to collective. However different these practices seemingly appear, they all strive in their various ways for some form of transformation, be it material, spiritual, psychological or political.
Exercise 1: Practicing

What constitutes a practice? Write a list in your learning log of different types of practice that exist in everyday life - personal, professional, political etc. Does the practice of meditation, walking, or cooking share anything with that of making art? What occurs in all of these forms of practice? What is changed? What is achieved? Write 200 words and complete between 4 and 8 visual pieces recording your observations. For the latter, explore in an exploratory manner, using a medium and approach of your own choosing.

Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the Checkpoint*, San Onofre, California, vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board, 27.9 x 35.6 cm, 1972, Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun gallery.

Eleanor Antin, *100 Boots at the beach*, Solana Beach, California, Vintage gelatin silver print mounted on board 31.8 x 47.8 cm, 1972, Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun gallery.
Topic 1: Idea and reality

In this topic and further topics throughout the course, you will be introduced to a number of artworks, texts and ideas gradually, so that the key debates unfold and begin to form a coherent sense of a larger picture as you progress. This approach correlates to the nature of Fine Art research discussed in the Introduction to the course.

Not knowing

‘Art is about chance-taking; about holding certainty at bay long enough to discover something. You have to feel that you are risking something when you start a work. It may be a minuscule risk, but still a risk. You’re trying to do something that you haven’t quite managed to do before, or you haven’t tried before…an idea, a move that you don’t know is viable. The only way that you can ever know whether it is a sound move is by carrying it through to completion. [...] Process means making something physical – bringing into existence and that cannot be achieved discursively. It requires perception harnessed to intuition…’

Thompson, 2009:349

Research point 1:

Research the work of Swiss artist Raphael Hefti.

Hefti is often described as a modern-day alchemist or pseudo-scientist. The artist explores the reactions of materials by manipulating industrial processes, in order to discover mistakes that enable transformations to take place. Hefti presents materials in conditions and states that might be considered in an industrial context as a sign of an error, malfunction or hazard. Through a sustained engagement with process, Hefti uses techniques and methods repeated over time to discover the point at which a material will become unstable, unfamiliar, or behave unexpectedly. The artist engages in a dialogue with manufacturers rather than going into the factory with a predetermined idea. Routine manufacturing processes and imperfections are pushed to their limits in order to discover new processes. These practices themselves are often subject to further mistakes and accidents. The final outcome is determined by the interplay between artist/manufacturer, chance/intention and known/unknown:

‘The work Replaying the Mistake of a Broken Hammer emerged from my time as an apprentice. During one endless week, we were filing a piece of metal super precisely to produce a hammer. On the last day we had to heat the steel to harden it, and between the two heating stages, I dropped it and it broke like glass. I think it’s fascinating how steel can become so brittle and fragile. I wanted to revisit this mistake by creating a work, putting steel through the hardening process, but interrupting it before completion. It has been hardened but remains brittle, and this beautiful change in colour also results from the process.’

Hefti, 2012:5
In another piece Underlay Push Sticks X15ChNiSi2520, industrial steel beams are repeatedly exposed to such intense temperatures that they combust, char and shatter like glass. By removing the strength of the steel, the beams are unable to function in the capacity in which they are expected. Hefti subverts materials and the associations attached to them by presenting them in states that are rarely witnessed. Materials that would be utilised in construction, valued in terms of their practical function, are transformed so that they become unfamiliar and unpredictable.


Practice frequently entails not knowing entirely what you are doing. You may start off with an idea, or theory, but as soon as you begin the process of trying to realise it, everything changes. Thinking about something, or observing it, is not the same as acting on it, handling, or making it. According to Arendt as soon as you take the initiative to act, something is put into motion that leads to the unexpected. As the abstract or hypothetical become real, something new is revealed.
Below is an extract from a conversation between Kate Horsfield (co-founder of Video Data Bank, which includes over 200 artists’ interviews) and the German Fluxus artist Joseph Beuys:

‘KH: How do you approach deciding to do a piece of art, or certain cases an action; what comes up to you before you start to do it; what do you know about it, and how do you proceed?
JB: I know a lot before I start an action. I know a lot about the necessity of the general idea of sculpture, but I don’t know anything about the process in which the action will run. When the action runs, my preparation works because I am prepared to do a thing without knowing where it goes. You see, it would be a very uninteresting thing - it would have nothing to do with art - if it were not a new experiment for which I have no clear concept. If I had a clear concept of solving the problem, I would then speak about the concept and it wouldn’t be necessary to make an action. Every action, every performance, brings a new element in the whole, an unknown area, an unknown world. […]

One of the most important statements of the enlarged understanding of art is that it is not only materials - formed, or in chaos if necessary - that have to do with sculpture. Thought is a sculptural process, and the expression of thinking forms in language is also art. This totality of humankind’s creativity - beginning with feelings and thoughts and their expression in a special material, the language material, for which you need your body and physical tools, your tongue, larynx, lungs, the air, sound waves, the ear of the other person - all has to do with the idea of sculpture in the future.’


Beuys does not know what will be set in motion by his action, except that something new will emerge. He does, however, go into the work with a clear idea of how it addresses and challenges sculptural concepts. Theory leads to practice, which leads to theory and so on – there is a toing and froing between knowing and not knowing. Putting something in motion can entail a state of flux, agitation, perplexity, or disruption. A new discovery might be made by pushing materials, processes, or concepts to their limits or approaching them in ways that haven’t been tried before – using things in the ‘wrong’ way, or by upsetting rules, hierarchies and conventions. Practice in this sense can be a research process, event or ongoing process.

Reading point 1:

Exercise 1.1: Testing limits

In a medium that you have some experience of working in, create a piece of work in which you are testing something new that you have not explored before and push it to its limit. Like Beuys and Hefti, it could be that you already have a framework that you are working within, but there must be some element that allows you to experiment, without a fixed outcome in mind. It could be a new material, process, approach, or technique. Describe and reflect on the process and the outcome in your learning log.

‘My work is to do with exploring and attempting to define particular states, sometimes momentary states. At the time of making, the search for hitherto unnamed is what matters. I can say I know the emotional and intellectual ambience in which I am working, the rest I find out as I go along. At most times I watch for the grimace between words, the substructures of unease which tell of a new pattern emerging, at good times something opens up and things just happen.’

Wakely, 2016:12

Shelagh Wakely, *From the series As Yet Unnamed*, Drawings, Ink on canvas, 180 x 239 cm, 1988-90, Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun gallery.
The success of failure

Practice might be seen as an oscillation between attempts to find order and a loss of control. It is often through doubt, anxiety, mistakes or failure that something unexpected is revealed:

‘I see it [failure] as a whole process towards finding out about something. That if something doesn't work it carries an enormous amount of information with it…

So the failure of it is that it hasn't quite happened yet, but I don't know what it should be. And that not-knowing state is often deemed a kind of failure; you must know what you want, you must know what your intentions are, you must know what your aims are and objectives are. It's such a harsh, unforgiving language. And yet the not knowing can often be that, as an artist, you're not working necessarily with very vivid visual, cerebral processes. you're actually trying to find those, and that's why you want to make the stuff, or draw the stuff, or paint the stuff. So the failure thing to me is very much associated with that striving for, and the struggle. Two words that I know are very fashionable. But there is something for me in the striving to find the visual thing that isn’t yet in one's head. It just doesn’t have a cerebral identity.’

Barlow, 2009:43

Reading point 2:

**Exercise 1.2: Failures**

Look through your studio practice to date and try to identify works, or points within the work, which you considered not to work in the way that you had intended. Reflect on what happened instead and what the ‘failure’ led to, or changed for you. Record your thoughts in your learning log.

Failure is not only a generative tool in practice, but human and artistic failure can also be the subject of the work intentionally and/or inadvertently. Whilst the idea of perfection can be perpetually reached for, flaws and failure seem to engender a particular curiosity and empathy.

**Research point 2:**

The American artist Bruce Nauman, like many Conceptual artists of the time, created works that explored frustration, futility and failure. 1966 he documented a performance Failing to Levitate in the Studio in which he attempted to levitate while lying between two chairs. The Dutch artist Bas Jan Ader also made many works that investigated failure. The artist pushed his enquiry to its limits in his final work In search of the Miraculous, 1975, in which he was lost at sea during an attempt to cross the Atlantic in a small boat. The boat was later found but he was never seen again. The ultimate failure, or success?

Research Robert Smithson, Partially Buried Woodshed, 1970. Below are some suggested links to get you started, use at least one of these to discover your own material: Does your research change your perception about the reflections on success and failure you made in the previous exercise?


(2016) ‘Buried Treasure’ In: Kent.edu 14.03.16

‘Partially Buried Woodshed’ In: Nga.gov

**Further research:**


Lived experience within art

Practice is rooted in the everyday. The boundary between art and life can be difficult to negotiate, but some artists deliberately explore or erase this distinction. The line can be blurred not only between artist/work but work/viewer. In the 1960’s this was particularly prevalent in the work of artists belonging to the Fluxus group (an international and interdisciplinary group of artists, which included, amongst others, Joseph Beuys, George Brecht, Robert Filliou, Allan Kaprow, Alison Knowles, Addi Køpcke, George Maciunas, Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik, Carolee Schneemann) known for their happenings, in Japan the Gutai group (founded by Shozo Shimamoto and Jiro Yoshihara), and in Brazil artists such as Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica. Many of their works relied on the active participation of the viewer in order to constitute the work. The emphasis was on the lived experience of the viewer rather than the passive appreciation of an art object. Fluxus artists wanted to make art available to the masses and believed that anyone could understand art and, in fact, produce it.
Research point 3:

The American artist and writer Mary Kelly is a pioneering feminist who has played a leading role in conceptual art and Postmodernism. Research Post Partum Document, 1973-1979. Begin with one of the links below and then continue your research independently.


The body as material

Cut Piece is one of Yoko Ono’s early performance works, which was debuted in Kyoto, in 1964, and has since been performed in Tokyo, New York, London, and, Paris in 2003. During the performance the artist sat alone on a stage, dressed in a suit, with a pair of scissors in front of her. The audience had been invited to take turns to approach the artist and use the scissors to cut off a small piece of her clothing, which they could keep. Ono remained motionless and expressionless throughout until she decided that the performance had ended.

Exercise 1.3: Cut Piece

In your learning log write what you think this work would have been like to experience from the perspective of the artist, the participant, and the audience. Describe the relationship between thinking, making and acting in Ono’s work. Think about how these occur in your studio practice and your own life as an artist.

Reading Point 3:


In the 1960s the American painter, dancer and performance artist Carolee Schneemann used her own body to explore issues of gender, sexuality and power. British artist duo Gilbert and George declared themselves ‘living sculptures’ and since the 1970’s rarely appear alone and always wear a suit in public. For them art cannot be disassociated from their everyday lives – they insist that everything they do is art. From 1983-1984 New York-based artists Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh remained tied together 24/7 at the waist by an eight-foot rope for their performance Rope Piece. They were not allowed to touch each other. Artists like Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Stelarc and Orlan also explore the physical and psychological limits of their bodies.

John Lennon and his wife Yoko Ono are having a week’s love-in in their room at the Hilton Hotel, March 1969 (b/w photo), Bridgeman Images.
Gilbert and George, *Bad Thoughts #1*, sixteen hand-coloured gelatin silver prints in frames, 1975, Bridgeman Images.
Exercise 1.4: Actions

Look up the work of three of the artists you have examined in this topic in more detail. In your sketchbook make a mind map of the various actions that these artists put into motion in their practices; add to it the impact these actions create for the viewer. Finally, link some of the shared themes in their works in terms of gender, sexuality, power, etc.

Further research:


Helen Rousseau, If you say so (III) Mind Out, MDF, card, tracing paper, tape, sponge, paint, metal, 2016, Image courtesy of the artist
Topic 3: Action as habit, method, rule
The experimental and the unknown often sit within a framework, a set of rules or conditions that are key to practice and go towards defining the identity of the work. It could be that an artist will only work with collected material with particular historical significance, a specific technique, or a single colour.

Material action

German conceptual artist, Hanne Darboven is known for her large-scale minimalist installations consisting of handwritten tables of numbers. During her stay in New York in the 1960’s Darboven developed her Konstruktionen – a neutral language of numbers in linear constructions using a pen, pencil, typewriter, and graph paper. The numbers not only represented a universal language but also allowed her to mark the passage of time. For Ein Jahrhundert (A Century) (1971–75), she visualized the hundred-year span through numbers representing each day and year starting with the number 00 and ending in 99.

The Japanese conceptual artist On Kawara in the Today series (1966-2014) also meditates on the concept of time by consistently implementing rules that he followed over nearly five decades. In the date paintings, Kawara painted the date on which the painting was made onto the centre of the canvas using acrylic paint. The date would be white and the background a monochromatic red, blue, or grey. The paintings range in size from 8 x 10 inches to 61 x 89 inches. The date was composed in the language and convention of the place where the painting was made; in countries using a non-Roman alphabet, Kawara used Esperanto. The paintings were meticulously created adhering to a series of steps that never varied. If unable to finish a painting by midnight, it was destroyed. Each painting was stored in a cardboard box constructed by the artist, which often contained a local newspaper cutting. Works were often given subtitles, drawn from the daily media.
**Exercise 1.5: Meditations**

Describe the types of meditation that take place in the production of the Today series and its conceptualisation by the viewer. How do praxis and theoria relate to each other in this work? Write 200 words in your learning log.

Ritualistic or obsessive strategies are often a feature in practice. Repetitive action and labour are important in the Post-Minimalist work of the American artist Jackie Winsor. For Bound Grid the artist meticulously unravels pieces of four-inch thick weathered rope in order to make her own twine. Once the material is prepared through this unwinding process, the twine is used to join tree branches together by wrapping them, using an equally slow and labour-intensive method. The process requires exactness and endurance to maintain adequate tension throughout. During this process, Winsor must have reached a point when the twine had fulfilled its function (to hold two pieces of wood together), but she nonetheless continued the activity. In an interview with the art historian Jeanne Siegel, Winsor says about the piece:
‘I was trained as a painter. What interested me in the use of rope and trees was, on one hand, how they naturally reflected an interest in drawing (line and color) and, on the other hand, how they had their own inherent fullness of energy. The piece, a wavy grid, was a line drawing or sculpture. There were thick lines that became bumps or bigger bumps. But mostly I was creating a balance and partnership of wood and rope.’

Siegel, 2004:75

These line drawings in space lead to the gradual accumulation of twine, creating significant knobbly joints, which begin to take over the grid. These shapes differ in shape and size and draw awareness to the negative spaces between them. In many places, accumulations of hemp have grown so large that they touch and conceal the wood. The use of hemp in this way brings to mind a practical attitude of fixing and mending (using what is to hand), which may be brought about through necessity. In the case of these sticks that do not necessarily need binding, the viewer becomes aware of the care that has gone into the act, and the absurdity of it. The notion of a perfect Minimalist grid is interrupted by the irregularity of the sticks, the spacing between them, and the hemp forms that occupy the arrangement. The familiar geometric structure of the grid is warped and misaligned so that it leans to one side, yet, the sense of a grid remains. The repetition that is present in geometric forms and patterns is echoed by Winsor’s repetitive craft activity, which corrupts the rigid form.

Such ritualistic behaviour can have a two-fold purpose and effect. It can be rhythmic, familiar and comforting, but it may at the same time be the symptom of underlying anxiety, avoidance or fear. In Bound Grid, time, labour, reassurance and unease are bound into the work. The artist spends time with the work; many of her pieces take years to complete. A period of wrapping might be followed by one of observation (or perhaps of forgetting for a time) before returning to the physical activity. Observation is by no means a passive pursuit – it is an active engagement. Through the repetitive act of binding, Winsor slows the passing of time and the materials accrue something new.

Dean Sobel suggests that Winsor’s work has an affinity with the ritualistic practices of Joseph Beuys and his treatment of materials such as fat, felt, butter and copper. Whilst artists such as Beuys may explicitly employ ritualistic practices, there are other artists that employ them in subtle ways, which may, or may not be discernible. Repetition of a particular set of actions or idiosyncratic processes can develop between the artist and material/process. Rituals might take place before (preparation), during (making), or after (reflection) the production of work. A particular set of habits, attitudes, or rhythms might emerge over time. The purpose of ritualistic practices is not to find the quickest or most efficient route, but to enable thinking space by slowing down the experience of time. It creates a circular experience of time, in which it is possible to be fully absorbed and receptive to what might become apparent.
Caroline Wright, *Temporal I*, egg tempera on Limewood, 30 x 25cm, 2017. Photo: Doug Atfield
Social action

The American performance artist and urban activist Theaster Gates creates sculptural work that does very well in the art market. With the money generated and grants from organisations, Gates has acquired real estate in the run-down neighbourhood where he is based. The Dorchester Project began in late 2006 when Gates purchased an abandoned building on 69th and Dorchester Avenue on Chicago’s South Side. The artist has continued to acquire more buildings in the neighbourhood, which had been derelict and boarded up since the 1980s. The materials salvaged from the interiors of the buildings are used to make further sculptures, the proceeds from which feedback into the project.

The buildings are gutted, rebuilt and refurbished in collaboration with other artists, craftspeople and unemployed people from the neighbourhood. Skills can be exchanged and developed and a sense of ownership created. Everything from the walls to the furniture is built from recycled, found and salvaged materials from the gutted interiors of properties and those of former Chicago factories and barns. The histories of these redundant buildings are preserved by using craft skills to bring out the beauty of the materials, which are worked into the refurbished spaces. Discarded things are given new meaning, value and a new lease of life. The discipline of craft is also elevated and reconsidered within a contemporary art context.

The spaces then function as cultural centres where talks, dinners and performances are hosted and live-work spaces are provided for artists, writers, musicians and dancers. Gates’ Sunday Soul Food dinners celebrate the rituals of communal cooking and eating that can bring together diverse people and ideas. Books and records from local shops and a collection of glass slides from the University of Chicago’s History of Art department have been saved, to create an archive for the local community. Gates is aware that the usual model of urban regeneration involves artists moving into an area, which is then gentrified and local residents are eventually pushed out. Although he cannot anticipate the motivations and behaviour of other developers and investors, Gates is determined that Dorchester Projects create a genuinely mixed community, by developing culture and place with sensitively to the people who are already there and who consider the place as their home.

Gates brings together two worlds (both of which are familiar to him) that would not necessarily meet – those who belong to a world in which the experience of deprivation, poverty and a lack of resources and opportunity is common, with those that belong to the art world.

Research point 3:

Reading point 4:
Exercise 1.6: Poiesis and praxis

Thinking about what is involved in Gates’ The Dorchester Project, are there aspects of the work that you would identify as poiesis and others as praxis? The ancient Greeks made the distinction between the two in an attempt to show that they were involved in the higher activity of praxis while slaves and barbarians (considered by the Greeks to be anybody Non-Greek) would toil in the lesser activity of poiesis. Do you think these terms are relevant in contemporary terms? Discuss this with someone if you can and record your conversation/observations in your learning log.

Further research:


Repetition

Much of life is taken up with the practice of repetitive tasks and activities to which varying degrees of attention is paid.

In art practice, repetition can operate in different ways. Like in the work of Winsor, it can involve a repeated gesture made by the body in order to manipulate material; it can manifest in a set of rules and labour that are applied consistently over a period of time, observed in the work of Darboven and Kawara; or it can be a set of issues or themes that recur.

However, repetition is always just an attempt to replicate something, which cannot be entirely the same. Just like the act of retrieving a memory, trying to repeat something that has already been enacted inadvertently reveals something new. Striving for the uniform can increase the ability to discern the difference and differentiate between what might in the first instance appear to be the same. A quality of perception is honed through this practice.

Reading point 5:

The Indonesian born, Australian artist Fiona Tan in her two-channel video installation Saint Sebastian, 2001 films a woman taking part in an archery competition as part of the annual Toshiya ceremony, a coming-of-age ritual that has been held in Kyoto’s Sanjûsangen-dô Buddhist temple for more than four hundred years. The Japanese style of archery known as kyudo is more concerned with the fluidity of movement than hitting the target. In the above text Tan shares some of her thoughts during the making of this film. The text includes quotes from the essay Preparing Your Mind by Saito Chobo (Link to the full essay below.) According to Chobo, an arrow shot with the utmost care is superior to many hundreds shot without it. Tan likens the practice of archery to that of art:

‘The art of archery and the art of art. The target is so far away that it seems irrelevant. My tools are the camera and the editing table ... A true shot in kyudo is not just one that hits the centre of the target, but one where the arrow can be said to exist in the target before its release.’

Tan, 2003:53

Further research:

Chobo, S. Kokoro No Yoi (Preparing Your Mind) 04.12.97 [online] At: https://sites.google.com/site/seishinkankyudo/kokoro-no-yoi (Accessed on 11.07.18)

Assignment one: Daily practice

Dedicate a period of time each day, (it could be 5 mins, or an hour) over a period of time from 3 days up to a maximum of 7 days (however, you could continue as part of your practice, if you choose to) to perform a repetitive task or activity. It could be a purely studio-based activity or related to something in your everyday life. Keep notes on what you are doing, how it progresses and how your relationship to the task changes. Document your progress in a form that suits your activity and reflect on this in your learning log in relation to a text from this part of the course that particularly resonates with your practice. Send all the work for Assignment one to your tutor.

Shelagh Wakely, some encounters with reality, Titled, signed and dated on recto, Ink on tracing paper, 29.5 x 41.5 cm, 1977, Image courtesy of Richard Saltoun gallery.
Reading and references

Books


Journals


Eline McGeorge, *When Species Meet*, Biomatic Hand and Seeds, ink jet print on Hahnejuhle Photo Rag paper, 70.7 x 50 cm, 2015, Image courtesy of Hollybush Gardens.