

Writing/Art

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. . . we have retained merely an etiolated idea of theory, without reflectively renewing the sense of the real and active relations between intellectual work and material practice in art....Artistic work is the very contrary of theory-it should mobilise and sustain movement within conflict.....we need the work of those students whose work does sustain attention to the balance and active relationship between material and idea, which does bear and go beyond the weight of any title, and from these examples, learn what sort of intellectual talk better informs the practical sensibilities of these students.¹
 (Wilde, 1999)

The relationship between “intellectual work and material practice in art” is complex. One of the ways in which we might begin to come to terms with what it is, what it might predict and the “intellectual talk” which would appropriately foster its development, is to investigate writing by artists in the course of doctoral study. In this context, the elucidation of the precise nature of the research art practice is of paramount importance: the research enquiry will be represented, near the time of the Viva, by written components and possibly, CDRoms, which will be deemed to be the research thesis. This means that unless unconventional procedures have been followed, the writing part of the research will present the research propositions, or questions, its rationale, findings, conclusions and recommendations to the field *before* the art work has been fully encountered. How then is the artist to appropriately introduce the art research? How and at what point is the art in question to determine the nature of that doctoral study? How, when and in what way is the materiality of ideas to be presented?

My own research, into the complexity of the relationship between “intellectual work and material practice in art” has been illuminated by a close investigation of a few singularly inventive doctorates in Fine Artⁱⁱ. In one of them, *sidekick* by Elizabeth Price (University of Leeds, 2000), the research art is also the research writing, and thus constitutes what I shall propose as art/writing, that is writing which is indissolubly connected to the research art. As indicated in the following excerpt from this doctorate, the careful weighing of evidence, of extrapolating findings, of judging their value, is subject both to the developing aesthetic of the art work and to its “sidekick”, that is, its material source in

the rolls of manufactured tape from which it is made. Its discourse is deeply informed by Marxist materialism and it is an homage to Duchampian absurdism through the concept and material realisation of the ready made; it is, in fact, a continuing 'rendezvous' with its artistic precedent, with which it is critically engaged because it is in progress.

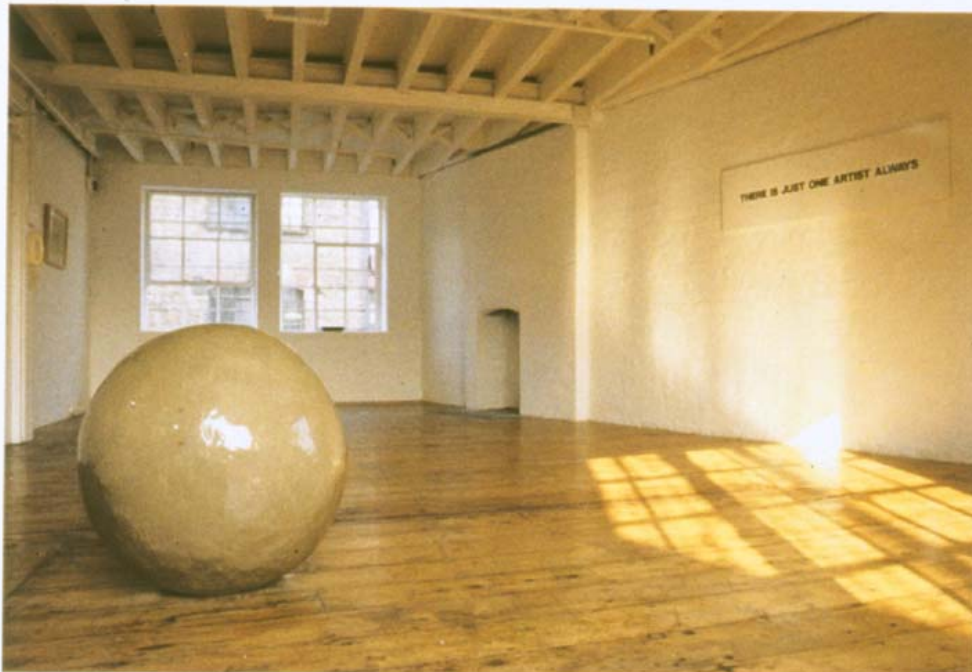
I wind packing tape from the roll upon which it is commercially distributed, and then rewind it again, but this time only upon itself. I wind the entire roll in this way without interruption. At the conclusion of one roll I continue with another, and so on, adding each to the same mass. Gradually the mass grows larger. I maintain this process without any fundamental changes.

. . . .

The solidity and weight of the boulder are important because they testify to the production of the thing. And this, the question of how the boulder was made is the prevailing ambiguity which ultimately necessitates these kinds of physical verifications. If the boulder is too light, then it was not produced entirely by winding tape. It might therefore be hollow, or include some other material. Weight is a means to gainsay, or corroborate the apparent visual evidence of the sphere. The testing and corroboration of evidence is time consuming and unending; here it is unpicked and pitched into a philosophical /theoretical arena by the conjunction, in an endlessly repeated ploy, of: So is the boulder a compact mass of wound tape? Did I make it in the way that I claim? Was it made in the way it appears to have been made? Certainly only one material and method is disclosed, but this does not preclude the possibility of others. And clearly the tape lends itself generously to these doubts in as much as it functions as a kind of skin which conceals and encapsulates other materials. There is certainly nothing evident that would disprove the possibility of deception. Even if the weight were consistent with a solid mass of tape, it would not prove that this was the nature of the mass; it might simply suggest a more sophisticated hoax.

In such a light the seemingly matter of fact descriptive qualities of the boulder, and the seemingly ingenuous descriptions of this text maybe begin to appear tactical rather than candid.

(Price, 2000)



boulder 10.98

boulder 10.98

Let us make a start then in our several efforts to understand the materiality of ideas by entering into this doctoral research soliloquy. The written text is in the form of a highly reflexive address to *boulder*, the work being made; it reflects on issues of value, truth, the provenance of ideas and the probity of an artist's relationship with her source material, that is, with its manufacture. It gently subverts the predicted assumptions of research data and findings, objective enquiry and the consensual truths of research standards: its descriptive purposes play with possibilities which appear to be inappropriate because they are of the moment, in live time; in the same vein as Hamlet's soliloquy, in Shakespeare's play of the same name, this soliloquy can be said to disturb understanding of surrounding events, in this case the host research cultures of research degrees in the UK. There is, as yet, no conventional format for this utterance, either within the disciplines of Art or within the broader research arenas; it can be said to "mobilise" theory and to cast light on the multiplicity of ways we predict that knowledge will be formulated. I will propose that if we attend to such research art and to its historical precedents, discourses in Art and the kind of conversations we could enjoy might be shifted in ways which are useful. It might be that we could start several new conversations, or "new intellectual talk" concerning why, as an academic community we so closely adhere to already established protocols, methods and procedures in the face of that which might be new.

In many ways, this doctorate presents an approach to its intellectual purposes, which is not new: it can easily be placed in the context of Surrealists' approaches to art and writing where little or no separation was acknowledged because both served the purposes of art, which were the purposes of revolutionary change. In the Surrealists' *poème-objets*, automatism and deployment of Freudian theory, it is clear that their ideas mobilised theory and that their cross disciplinary practices such as art and writings produced a lability of that relationship. Art may well refuse stasis: it is action, not necessarily directed at social or political change, as it was with the Surrealists, but it is certainly thought in action. One has only to follow the exemplary writings of Mieke Bal on Louise Bourgeois' "Spider", or TJ Clark's on Nicholas Poussin's "Man Killed by Snake", to understand just how complex the enacted thought in individual art works might be. Indeed, Bal makes clear that "Spider", in its dense and subversive approach to genre and discipline formulations is, of itself, a "theoretical object". However, in our current, rapacious pursuit of theory, we have paid far too little attention to the individual art work, its material specificities and purposes, to its description, in fact. It is my view that if we wish to genuinely understand art research, and the materiality of ideas presented through art, we need to address ourselves much more directly to it, what it is and how it functions. Close attention to the ways in which the materiality of its ideas complicates intellectuality will serve to renew conversations and "intellectual talk" through which we might learn.

i I would like to add Estelle Barrett's review comment as it illuminates a complex issue briefly: 'artistic work is the very contrary of theory'. I am not sure if this binary or dichotomy holds. Gramsci, Haraway and La Tour would argue that the use of thoughts and ideas are inseparable from practice, ie theory is itself embodied and language (used creatively), according to Kristeva, is material. Perhaps art practice resuscitates and recuperates theory by revealing the false logic and binaries that emerge from 'solidified' theory.

ii Macleod, K & Holdridge, L "The Doctorate in Fine Art: The importance of exemplars to the culture" *International Journal of Art & Design Education*, 23.2, 2004 pps 155-168

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