

States of inbetweenness

Within the project of *The Printer's Grey* much of the focus is placed on the production of prints within the studio environment with specialized equipment and materials, such as presses, acid baths, exposure units and rollers. Although a virtue of the discipline, at times the notion of intuition comes to the fore, when one *knows* that something will work without being able to qualify this *knowing*. As such, the importance of the hand-knowledge of craft practitioners cannot be underestimated in relation to printmaking as a valuable form of *knowing*, which is different from empirical forms of knowledge. This distinction between different forms of *knowing* has been explored in terms of propositional and tacit knowledge.

Epstein and Prak, while reflecting on guild-based training, speak of the propositional and tacit epistemological systems in the following:

Propositional knowledge is factual as well as theoretical, logical and explicit, and can therefore be learned from printed sources. Tacit knowledge, on the other hand, is implicit, non-linear, and addresses 'how' rather than 'why' questions. Because it cannot be articulated – 'we can know more than we can tell', as one scholar put it – tacit knowledge needs to be transferred from person to person. This is confirmed by psychological research that demonstrates how this transfer of tacit knowledge happens most effectively in 'communities of practice', like craft guilds; modern skills training programmes in fact still reflect this. (2008:6-7)

From Epstein and Prak's writing it is clear that the intuitive *knowing* or hand-knowledge falls under the definition of tacit. The etymology of the term *tacit* further elucidates this. The term stems from Latin *tacitus* meaning 'silent', gesturing to that which is "understood or implied without being spoken" (*Oxford English Dictionary*. 2012. Sv 'tacit'). In *The Art of the Maker*, Peter Dormer, in describing the *plastic arts*⁷ uses the terms skill and craft as interchangeable terms for tacit knowledge - that which must be demonstrated and cannot be adequately captured in spoken or written words. Despite the 'silent' and experiential nature of tacit knowledge, Dormer posits craft knowledge as a disciplined knowledge, "as disciplined as applied science" (Dormer 1994:17).

Craft knowledge also makes use of a concrete, precise verbal and written language. This language does not adequately describe the actual carrying out of a process because in any description of a practical activity too much that is important gets left out. Nonetheless, every craft has a technical language. (Dormer 1994:17)

Dormer further notes that “[c]raft knowledge frequently uses precise language whose beauty derives from the craftperson’s close knowledge of the material, the tools and the processes” (Ibid.:18). A relationship therefore exists between the technical language of a craft (propositional knowledge) and the silent workings of the craft (tacit knowledge), both of which are reflected in the production of the craftsperson. The beauty of the language of a craft, which in this project is printmaking, is as a result of the presence of the craftsperson and their investment in the materials. In this way Dormer starts to speak of the craftsperson in a magical way. The craftsperson, in holding both propositional and tacit forms of knowledge, becomes the alchemist – simultaneously the scientist using empirical methods as well as the magician – using more intuitive methods. Both of these types of knowledge are present within the skilled practitioner and the well-wrought print, since the tacit and propositional cannot be neatly separated out. Rather, the craft practitioner, or in this case the printmaker, operates between tacit and propositional forms of knowledge.

While thinking and writing about craft skill, Dormer briefly mentions an inner dialogue that occurs within the practitioner while in the process of making. It is what Dormer terms dialogue that I would call the thinking space within printmaking – the in-between of tacit and propositional knowledge. Dormer describes this dialogue as the following:

In the most complex crafts there is, for the expert in it, a form of dialogue going on between the practitioner, his expertise, and the goal that the practitioner is trying to make or find. Dialogue is not quite the right word, partly because in order to make progress an expert must rely on his or her expertise without concern. (Dormer 1994:19)

Dormer acknowledges the insufficiency of the word ‘dialogue’, and he rightfully points out that the expert rarely thinks about the silent or tacit aspects of their knowledge, but rather implements it as if it is second nature. Just as the “inability to describe the core of a craft becomes more and more acute the closer the craft comes to being an ‘art’” (Dormer 1994:14) so the need to ‘think about’ the carrying out of a hand skill becomes more and more acute as the tacit understanding of a craft becomes more developed. However, when Dormer speaks of the reliance on “expertise without concern” (Ibid.:19) I do not believe he is implying a thoughtless process, but rather is hinting at a complex and organic thinking process which does not need to be rationalized constantly during the act of making. To assert the presence of hand-knowledge and the idea that making is thinking is to acknowledge that the “cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself” (Arnheim cited in Johnson 2010:149). This assertion, that seeing and making is a thinking process, relates to the importance of the technique, material and process of

printmaking in the creation of a printed artwork. To lose sight of technique is to disavow the medium's inextricable role in creating the image.

While the technical aspects of printmaking allow one to produce a print, the decisions made during the production become part of the content of the print and therefore cannot be divorced from the 'conceptual' aspects of the image. The systematic, technical constraints of printmaking therefore provide the space for play and experimentation rather than inhibiting the flexibility of creative expression – the printmaker's reliance on technique merely requires a different type of play and thinking through visual form. Dormer draws the same conclusion as he observes that “[d]esigners lose control over their creation once they relinquish it to production, whereas one of the strengths of a handicraft-based art form is the flexibility it allows for the artist to change, expand and explore his original intention (or design) until the point he or she considers that the art work is complete” (1994:30). This flexibility, however, proceeds from the structured, rules-based learning of a craft skill in that “learning may well involve drilling and rote-learning, but [...] once the rules are mastered, one has freedom to be creative with them” (Janik cited in Dormer 1994:23). Arnheim, in listing cognitive operations, supports Dormer's idea of the flexibility of the artist within craft skill as he distinguishes “active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating, putting in context” (Arnheim cited in Johnson 2010:149) as perceptual thinking processes. All of these processes at work within the print studio are therefore part of the dialogue between the knowledge of the craft, the craft itself and the work being produced, all of which are held together in the craftsman or printmaker.



Fig 8. Joseph Beuys, *Directional forces* emerging from discussions at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (1974). London



Fig 9. Joseph Beuys, *Directional forces* as installed in the René Block Gallery (1975). New York

Let us not fool ourselves. All of us, including those who think professionally, as it were, are often enough thought-poor; we are far too easily thought-less. Thoughtlessness is an uncanny visitor who comes and goes everywhere in today's world. For nowadays we take in everything in the quickest and cheapest way, only to forget it just as quickly, instantly. (Heidegger 1966:44-45)

In the quote above Martin Heidegger is simultaneously critiquing thoughtlessness and motioning towards mindfulness. As Mugerauer, on writing about Heidegger, put it: "At the least, he is asking us to reflect on what we do and on how we do it" (1988:2). This reflection, or the mindful application of activity, has become increasingly important to the way I think about printmaking, due to the repetitive and ritualized nature of the process, which could easily become mindless. I do not believe that the repetitive or ritualized aspects of printmaking are mindless, but rather that they allow for different modes of thinking and reflection. Just as Epstein and Prak noted a distinction between two types of knowledge, Heidegger draws a distinction between two types of thinking, namely calculative and meditative. Anderson, in the introduction to *Discourse on Thinking*, notes Heidegger's insistence that "the calculative thinking of modern science and its humanly significant applications are discerned in and through meditative thinking" (1966:13). From this we see that Heidegger creates an opposition between meditative and calculative thinking, while embedding calculative thinking within meditative thinking. Anderson continues to expand on this in the following:

By contrast to representative thinking [what Heidegger would refer to as calculative thinking], it [meditative thinking] is thinking which allows content to emerge within awareness, thinking which is open to content. Now thinking which constructs a world of objects understands these objects; but meditative thinking begins with an awareness of the field within which these objects are, an awareness of the horizon rather than of the objects of ordinary understanding. (Anderson 1966:24)

Calculative or representational thinking is therefore preoccupied with objects, both in creating and understanding them – that which is quantifiable, perhaps even propositional. Meditative thinking, however, is closer to relational thinking in that it broadens the field of thought beyond the object and sees the object in relation to 'field' and 'horizon'. In other words, calculative thinking is linear or based in silos, whereas meditative thinking is networked and relational. Heidegger qualifies this when he states that meditative thinking "demands of us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all" (Heidegger 1966:53). This is in a sense what liminality as a thinking and *becoming* process is about – reflecting on the relationships between things, especially things which seem to be contradictory or seem to repel each other.

Meditative thinking also holds another dimension for Heidegger, namely contemplation. When pitted against calculative thinking, Heidegger claims that only meditative thinking “contemplates the meaning which reigns in everything that is” (1966:46). While Heidegger’s goal is to conceive of “man’s authentic nature” (Anderson 1966:14) - the nature of Being – what I find of importance is the macro position meditative thinking assumes in order to allow for a contemplative or reflexive space. The delays in the printmaking process offer this space of meditation or contemplation – space to reflect on the actions already undertaken as well as the contemplation of or thinking through the next set of actions. The printmaker’s reliance on technology opens up these spaces of delay, which force a distance between the printmaker (craftsperson) and the work being produced. It is within this space that my notebooks play an important role for recording these thought processes as they progressively occur in the studio, between experimenting with techniques and materials and creating artworks. It is therefore both within the act of doing (labour) and in the temporary pause of labour that thinking occurs as a push and pull between focusing on a task at hand and remaining mindful of the process and desired outcome as a whole. This, for me, is a meditative, thoughtful interaction with hand-based processes.

⁷ Dormer uses the term *plastic arts* to speak about both the applied arts (skill based arts, perhaps what could be termed *craft*) and fine arts. He qualifies the term as meaning “painting, sculpture and studio craft whose content is substantially dependent on practical skill, and whose intention is discoverable through the process of making the object.” (1994:7)