

What is visual intelligence and how do artists use it?

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Author's biographical note

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Abstract

This paper seeks to investigate the way visual artists think and make and, most importantly, the relationship between their thinking and making. To do this I use material from a recent artists' seminar set up to record ten invited artists' experiences of making their work. The term I am proposing for the interconnection of thinking and making is 'visual intelligence'. The term seeks to address the fact that most visual artists make a number of decisions whilst making their work that aren't purely conceptual or only to do with material and technique but lie in the relationships between these aspects of making. I investigate the difficulties associated with the terms 'visual' and 'intelligence'. I attempt to map patterns of thinking and making and ask whether it is possible to chart the evolution of an artist's creative thought through their making processes.

What is visual intelligence and how do artists use it?

When artists make art an evolution occurs. As Martin Kemp has said,

"...works of art are physical products made by executants who face real challenges and do not come ready made from the heads of their makers." [Martin Kemp, *The Art Book*, volume 10, issue 2 (March 2003): 37]

This paper seeks to investigate these 'real challenges', that is the way visual artists think and make and, most importantly, the relationship between their thinking and making. To do this I will be using material from a recent artists' seminar set up to record ten invited artists' experiences of making their work. The term I am proposing for the interconnection of thinking and making is 'visual intelligence' and, whilst the phrase has its difficulties, for many it proves an interesting proposition. Ian Kiaer one of the artists participating in the seminar noted,

"[Visual intelligence] gives some sense of an art practice and its relationship to thought in a work [it] suggests the creation of the kind of space that makes thought and poesis possible'.

The term seeks to address the fact that Kemp highlights; most visual artists make a number of decisions whilst making their work that aren't purely conceptual or only to do with material and technique but lie in the relationships between these aspects of making. I wish to investigate this decision making process in order to ascertain whether patterns of thinking and making occur and whether it is possible to map the evolution of an artist's creative thought through their making processes. At this moment in time the articulation of a visual intelligence could be helpful for both intellectual and pragmatic reasons, which I shall soon outline. Firstly though, it should be stated that the problems presented by both words in this pairing cannot be underestimated, continually presenting a threat to capsize its usefulness. However, it is hoped that the phrase may present a genuine life raft, enabling the decision-making processes of contemporary visual practices to be recognised and enter certain academic debates where they have been largely absent. For contemporary visual art practitioners it is crucial that their endeavours are respected and that they are able to feed into critical dialogues. Not only does such exchange provide documents for future generations, it also furthers an artist's development (1).

Discussion of the visual in relation to contemporary art practice is extremely problematic, not least because, as the critic Matthew Collings recently pointed out in relation to current writing about art,

"...observations are never visual, because art now is extremely unvisual..."
[Matthew Collings, 'Hothouse flowers', www.theguardian.co.uk, 18/12/04]

However no one would deny that the meaning and importance of much contemporary art does revolve around its visual means and, for all art, it is, at the very least, an important component of its being and effect. I will be using 'visual' as an expanded term, as I explain in the following section. Forums for the debate of the visual are all the more necessary considering the current ill fit between the funding available for art practitioners and their practices. The UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council is quite clear; 'research' must take written form in order for it to become part of academic research culture. This presents many difficulties for creative practitioners in academia who, since

2001 at least, have been attempting to shoehorn their studio practices into the required research criteria, leading British artist Jon Thompson to publicly state,

“Artists don’t go to their studios to do research but to make art.” [Paul Glinowski, ‘Losing it in translation’, *a-n Magazine*, December 2004: 26]

It should also be noted that the country’s largest public arts funding body, the Arts Council of England, does not make aesthetic or critical judgements about the artwork in projects it undertakes to fund. No visual material is necessary when submitting a visual arts application. In many ways one can understand such a move as a response to charges of old school elitist ‘taste’ and a desire to make the application procedure open to all. It is also true that every applicant starts from a level playing field in the sense that, as no candidate’s track record is sought, all proposals are prospective and succeed on the merits of their hypothesized written description. In short, the proposal must ‘read well’, fulfilling certain criteria in relation to its proposed audience and (good) professional practice. The notion of ‘serendipity’ funding, that is resourcing a ‘known’ candidate on an unspecified project, is virtually unknown in this country (2). Again there are perfectly good egalitarian reasons for this way of operating and yet, next to the AHRC’s adherence to the written word, it seems to signal a crisis in confidence when faced with the prospect of making judgements regarding the visual. As well one might.

The difficulties of the visual

The ‘visual’ in contemporary debate is much contested and I will briefly outline some of the difficulties associated with its primacy within academic study and its dissolution within contemporary art practice. In her essay ‘Art history visual culture’ (2004), Deborah Cherry outlines the factions within the ‘traditional’ discipline of art history and its more recent ‘rival’, visual studies, examining their varying attitudes to the visual. The visual within current modes of enquiry is anything but neutral and, through theories of the ‘gaze’, we are familiar with the notion of looking’s relationship to power. Cherry draws attention to,

“A swathe of recent interpretations [who have] argued that the project of Western modernity was achieved by the privileging of sight and the enmeshing of visibility, knowledge and power” [Deborah Cherry, ‘Art History visual culture’, *Art History*, September 2004, Vol 27 No 4:486]

Visual studies has not only broadened the scope of subject under examination from art to culture at large, but also uncovered the unacknowledged agendas of aesthetics. However according to Cherry it can be

“...curiously inattentive to the complexity and specificity of the visual.” [Cherry, ‘Art History visual culture’, *Art History*, September 2004, Vol 27 No 4:483]

It seems that visual studies use as a wide ranging tool of investigation and analysis is earned at the expense of art history’s ability to contextualise and scrutinise in detail. However both disciplines’ relationship with the visual remains fundamental; Cherry sees visual culture, like art history, “accepts without question” what Tom Crow describes as,

“...the most cherished assumption of high modernism ...the view that art is to be defined by its essentially visual nature, by its working exclusively through the

optical faculties.” [Cherry, ‘Art History visual culture’, *Art History*, September 2004, Vol 27 No 4:483]

The visual then has an established critical domain but one that finds itself increasingly estranged from contemporary developments. Contemporary visual art invigorates itself via other academic fields such as psychoanalysis, philosophy and political theory, which enable it to join current debates.

The challenge for new ways of understanding and relating to art is re-iterated by art itself as it has evolved during the twentieth century. Indeed it is the ramifications of art’s absorption of the debates of visual studies and (new) art history that prompt Matthew Collings’ earlier observation. Cherry quotes Charles Harrison characterising conceptual art as a “withdrawal of visibility” and notes the emergence of art practices that are “antagonistic or averse to the visual” and call for a different type of critical response. With reference to this dilemma, the art historian Francis Halsall advocates a notion of ‘sensism’. He describes this as,

“The manifold sensory experience... which is then synthesized into a conceptual unity of understanding”. [Halsall, ‘One Sense is Never Enough’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2 :108]

When discussing the inadequacy of art history’s privileging of the visual in relation to contemporary art he takes as his example the challenge of Robert Smithson. He outlines the way the work *Spiral Jetty* operates across media, time and space.

“...[if] *Spiral Jetty* is but one link in a chain of signifiers which are not only visual but textual, aural, oral and even olfactory, then how should we as art historians approach it? ...It would seem that the art historian’s trusty apparatus of formal analysis and visual iconography will not work in the face of a work that will, by its very complex nature, resist such an easy simplification”. [Halsall, ‘One Sense is Never Enough’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2:105]

Nevertheless it is worth remembering that Halsall has this insight when he leaves his books to visit *Spiral Jetty* to see it ‘with his own eyes’ as it were, gaining a physical experience of it. Although he advocates eschewing the ‘over-prioritization of sight’ or what Cherry calls the “ocularcentrism of visual studies” his investigation continues to enact art history’s investment in empiricism. Whilst it is vital to acknowledge this ‘embodied’ perception, it must not be forgotten that it happily includes the agency of sight. Other art historians also seek to address this perceived inadequacy, avoiding Halsall’s ‘easy simplification’

“...of a discrete, direct and logical symbolic correspondence within the visual icon (or sign) to that which it signifies and the system which mediates this representation”. [Halsall, ‘One Sense is Never Enough’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2:105]

Indeed, although Smithson’s work may well be ‘complex’ this is surely to do with the way it explores its subject(s) in relation to its form(s), rather than its particular material manifestation. Such complexity may be equally found in works throughout history and requires skilful and meticulous attention to unravel. In answer to such a need Norman Bryson suggests the possibility of a “reformulation of where the work stands in time” which he locates in the writings of Mieke Bal. Bal also advocates an experiential account of a work, one that does not attempt a finite summation, but rather seeks to describe a

performative encounter between a work and its audience, contingent on context. She describes it thus,

“Perception, however, is a psychosomatic process, strongly dependent, for example, on the position of the perceiving body in relation to the perceived object.....The degree of familiarity with what one sees also influences one’s perception.....Perception, in fact, depends on so many factors that it is pointless to strive for objectivity”. (Mieke Bal, *Looking In; The Art of Viewing* (Amsterdam, G&B Arts International, 2001): 42)

Indeed the idea that seeing can in some way be hived off from the rest of experience or that the visual can be isolated from other elements no longer holds any sway, as the disenchantment with formalism attests. However, this is not to advocate an ‘any analysis goes’ approach, rather it is just to acknowledge the interdependency of the sensory and contextual in perception.

It might also be important to note here the impossibility of separating seeing from thinking. Thinking **is** part of looking: we choose what it is we look at and understand that what we see is often not what is. A study such as Rudolph Arnheim's *Visual Thinking*, examines how we think through our senses, that is perceptually. The information our senses afford us is shaped and determined individually at the point of reception, occurring continually in everyday life. He says,

“...the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself” [Rudolph Arnheim, *Visual Thinking*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles & London, University of California Press, 1969):13]

Compelling writing by art historians such as Michael Baxandall, Svetlana Alpers and Michael Podro have in common a sense that their analyses are founded in a primary experience of looking; the intuitions or reactions experienced whilst contemplating a work of art are acknowledged and then related to a scholarly exploration of the artists works and processes. Indeed Svetlana Alpers and Michael Baxandall’s preface their book on Tiepolo with comments regarding what they perceive as the current ‘depreciation’ of the visual in academic art criticism and state their intention to,

“...locate [Tiepolo’s] visual quality as directly as possible....without reference to [historical] circumstances and context.” [Alpers & Baxandall. *Tiepolo and the Pictorial Intelligence*, Yale University Press, 1994: foreword]

To the debate around visual studies and art history then perhaps one might also want to add the multivalent ‘studio practice’ to the methods of enquiry. Often disparaged as the least disciplined of all the disciplines, an inconsistent hotch-potch of ideas and theories drawn from the academic debates it exists in ephemeral forms; verbal critiques, artists talks and statements and, occasionally, catalogue essays and exhibition reviews. The words that emerge from practices often include the voicing of something experiential and provisional and with a sense of personal imperative; much is at stake. The transient nature of such material is crucial, they are of the moment, used in the service of the visual work, work that is to be experienced rather than ‘read’.

The problem that lies at the heart of the debate may be this; a complete articulation of what happens when we experience a work of art is impossible. Visual art’s academic

disciplines so called ‘priviliging’ of the visual may be viewed as an over compensation for its inability to find adequate means of translating the visual. As Podro concludes his book *Depiction*,

“Critical description never properly or adequately corresponds to the interest and force of a painting, both because our interest is irreducibly bound to our perceiving, and because what we describe takes on its force for us only in the context of innumerable other recognitions in which it is embedded and which lie beyond the scope of describing.” (Michael Podro, *Depiction*, (New Haven & London, Yale University Press,1998):147)

Halsall appears to agree citing,

“...[the] fundamental paradox which lies at the heart of the art historical method – namely the incommensurability between works of art and, in the words of James Elkins, the words that fail them.” [Halsall, ‘One Sense is Never Enough’, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2: 114]

Rather than avoid the idea of the visual then, it would make sense to acknowledge its importance in our perception of art and its basis in the material, sensory world. In the term ‘visual intelligence’ then, the visual refers to the perceived physical nature of medium and process. Accepting our inability to verbally define the visual is important and perhaps releases us to engage with the more ephemeral kinds of statements about art that issue from a studio practice. The purpose of allowing artists’ voices to enter the fray is to muddy any notion of ‘purity’ in the visual realm, rather than act as an ultimate authority or simplistic closure to debate. The way artists understand and articulate their own processes may be clouded with blind spots. Whilst they may produce subjective statements rooted in time and place, yet if artists are willing to share their experiences, we stand to gain an understanding of the transactions between thinking and making that are otherwise unavailable to us and so begin to demystify the creative process.

Intelligence

The term ‘intelligence’ and its use in relation to the workings of artists, is also somewhat problematic. In several books on the subject Howard Gardner, explores the notion of multiple intelligences, some of which are exploited in the making of a work of art. He summarises,

“It is at least an open question, an empirical issue, whether the operation of one symbolic system such as language involves the same abilities and processes as such cognate systems as music, gesture, mathematics or pictures’. [Howard Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, (London, Fontana Press,1993): 25]

and states his position,

“To my way of thinking, the mind has the potential to deal with several different kinds of content but a person’s facility with one content has little predictive power about his or her facility with other kinds.....human beings have evolved to exhibit several intelligences and not draw variously on one flexible intelligence.” [Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, (London, Fontana Press,1993): xv]

His theory has reached wide-ranging acceptance not least because it seems to be exemplified in the world around us (we all know people who seem intelligent in different ways) and in scientific studies (neuropsychology). Gardner outlines seven types of intelligence which ‘work together’ in different configurations in creative individuals to produce cultural outputs or (to use his term), ‘symbolic systems’. In this list he includes ‘spatial intelligence’ which ‘grows out of one’s observation of the visual world’ and enables those who possess it to both imagine and recognise objects in space. Although he can locate this type of intelligence in scientists (Einstein), artists demonstrate it most clearly and he draws on examples from the life and work of Picasso, Michelangelo and Henry Moore. When spatial intelligence is not accompanied by technical facility (bodily intelligence) it surfaces as discriminatory connoisseurship (Kenneth Clark).

Contemporary art practice includes such a range of activities it might be difficult to trace the particular skill or talent of spatial intelligence on to an art practice in any meaningful way. However it is important to note that Gardner’s argument does not confine itself to imagining or replicating the visual world. He says,

“In the last analysis there is a definite logic in the pursuit of the arts, one that sets it apart from the imitation of nature and places it closer to other areas of rigorous investigation.” [Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, (London, Fontana Press, 1993):200]

He quotes Constable,

“Painting is a science and should be pursued as an enquiry into the laws of nature. Why then may not landscape be considered a branch of natural philosophy as much as pictures are but experiments?”

And Cezanne,

“I am going on with my researches” [Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, (London, Fontana Press, 1993):200]

It is this notion of intelligence then, as it relates to a methodology of creativity, that I wish to pursue.

Although in the minds of many the idea of intelligence will be inextricably linked to some kind of rating system, intelligence tests and their interpretations are continually under debate. For example in trying to decide which intelligences a candidate might possess, Gardner notes,

“At present it must be admitted that the selection (or rejection) of a candidate intelligence is reminiscent more of an artistic judgement than of a scientific assessment.” [Gardner, *Frames of Mind, The Theory of Multiple Intelligences*, (London, Fontana Press, 1993):62]

Given the difficulties inherent in absolute (or even consensual) judgements then, in this part of my research it has proved most useful to regard intelligence as a process, the ways the mind works, rather than as an adjective, an attribute to be bestowed by a critic/psychologist. Indeed by analyzing how, in relation to why, an artist makes one decision rather than another, within the different and individual terms each artist initiates, one may begin to plot visual intelligence at work. As Piaget famously realised, it is the lines of reasoning rather than the isolated answer that yields most information. An examination of visual intelligence is best investigated by both, that is by looking at the decision making process in relation to the artwork produced. Studies such as Arnheim’s

analysis of the sketches for Picasso's *Guernica* or Gardner's account of 'linguistic intelligence' in the jottings of Stephen Spender examine process carefully in order to see how intentions are played out and problems solved when a work gets made. This more detailed investigation of an individual's practice is planned at a later stage of this research. What I plan to do here is explore the general patterns that emerge across a group of artists' processes as they reflect on the dynamic between the making (the visual in the expanded sense to include both material and the observed realms) and thought. T.J. Diffey wonders 'whether creativity is a possible object of study' and, in reading Ghiselin's 1955 study, *The Creative Process*, is disappointed,

"I took it for granted that there was a process, called the creative process and that this book would explain what it was. However what I find were statements, fascinating but irreducibly particular. They did not seem to constitute elements in, or steps towards, the progressive mastery of a body of knowledge." [T.J. Diffey, 'On steering clear of creativity', *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2:95]

By examining 'intelligence' rather than 'creativity' perhaps we can tackle some of Diffey's misgivings, making the study less reliant on 'myths' of creative genius and more appropriate to a contemporary practice. Perhaps it might be possible to unpick and re-evaluate words such as 'inspiration', 'intuition' or 'creative block' still used by artists, yet shunned by contemporary theorists for both mystifying the creative process and placing the artist at the centre of production. It is hoped that these emerging patterns of engagement will form a structure through which we will be able to examine the particularities of individual artists' practices.

It is true that the evidence we are examining here takes verbal rather than visual form and one only needs look at Alpers' and Baxandall's examination of the drawing and cartoons of Tiepolo in relation to his finished frescos to see how interesting individual studies of the visual means of contemporary artists would be. An artist like Tieoplo adopts various sequential strategies that establish processes allowing him to think laterally and tangentially, problem solving on the way to a major work. Michael Podro draws attention to the way Hogarth's reworking of his own imagery and the visualisation of his reading in subsequent years provide us with clues to later works. Podro's attention to process is important here; in order to analyse how a complex and substantial work is made he draws on its relation to earlier works, where echoes appear. In the revisions that take place he is able to detect Hogarth's thought patterns. Indeed it is this model of examination of artists' processes that I wish to adopt and adapt in further work and something I wish to examine in an appropriate form at a later stage of this research. However, given that this particular essay is not concerned with making aesthetic or critical judgements of either the work or the process, the artists' own articulations seem a good place to start.

Visual intelligence in ten British artists' processes

In October 2004 ten British artists were invited by Lancaster University's Art Department to take part in a seminar where they responded to a list of questions about their practice

(see Appendix). The questions related to their process and asked the artists to reflect on the decisions taken during the making of an artwork. The artists who took part were; Maria Chevaska, Colin Crumplin, Michael Ginsborg, Beth Harland, Paula Kane, Ian Kiaer, Rachel Lowe, Mary Maclean, Rebecca Sitar and Alison Wilding. These artists all have established practices, exhibit regularly, are from different generations (age range 34 to 63) and work in a range of media (video, painting, drawing, collage, sculpture, installation, photography). The material below draws together the artists' contributions to the seminar

"There are moments in between projects where Bruce Nauman's dictum of 'how to proceed and how to proceed correctly' seems appropriate." Ian Kiaer

In established artistic practices parameters are developed within which events happen - the 'process'. While it is true that some processes may 'feel' more spontaneous than others, it is rare for something to occur outside the boundaries an artist has put in place. Rachel Lowe describes how these self-imposed parameters are often bound up with the material form the artist is using.

"...there's something about using Super 8, the idea that there's three minutes of footage and you have to think about what's going to be within that,. It sets boundaries for me which I find really useful".

Procedures and systems emerge from the limits of the medium and, rather than constrict, they give the artist structure and a sense of freedom. There are times however when the limits of the medium will be temporarily exhausted, and painter Beth Harland examines this when talking about her interest in digital imagery. She suggests changing media can propel the work's trajectory. She says,

"Jon Thompson talks about 'learning how to make a space for yourself in which to act' and says 'sometimes painters have to do something else to find this' and this rang true with me – sometimes you need to work with another process or medium to find that space. I think new mediums bring with them different ways of looking and thinking and they disturb your habits."

The parameters and procedures for the making of a visual artwork develop through a relation between the material process, and concept or idea. For Colin Crumplin, an artist who 'use[s] chance as a key element' in his work, the attachment to a system, the setting of 'a programme in motion' is fundamental to his practice,

"For about fifteen years I've made paintings, drawings and prints according to a set of strategies, which evolved from previous practices. A lot of the decisions were decisions that were set in previous practices but which I've opted not to change."

Whilst Lowe uses the medium's boundaries to facilitate the work's evolution, Crumplin has devised a system for making work which correlates the medium's properties to a dominating 'external' concept. He comments,

“The starts to these paintings are more or less successful and I have seldom thrown them away later which seems to be an acceptance that one just has to go through with it.”

Beth Harland also adopts an approach to making that has a conscious ideological framework. She describes its thus,

“One of the things that is very important to me is the notion of *Faktura*, which is from the Soviet avant-garde. It’s an emphasis on the mechanical quality and the materiality of the procedure.... For me the linking of form and content is crucial so that painting as a practice signifies subject just as much as the found or constructed image that I choose to work from..... I want to resist making a representation of something in the world, so that the matter of painting itself is a mode of address and a site of critical thinking which goes beyond the image.”

Artists then, continually write their own internal rule books prior to making work. Any study of visual intelligence would thus need to begin by a thorough mapping of an individual’s acknowledged boundaries. Before work commences many possibilities are hypothesised and decisions are taken. Often the artist consciously submits to a chosen genre or form in order to be placed within an historically prescribed dialogue. Each medium or convention requires different skills at different stages, often used strategically by the artist to facilitate their thinking around a work’s evolution. However Michael Ginsborg’s phrase, “I am trying to give myself permission”, suggests the necessity (and difficulty) of testing these predetermined limits. Whilst these sets of limits facilitate an artist’s production, it is the way those boundaries are negotiated that is important to a work’s success. As Julian Bell writes,

‘With the mid-1930s inception of the Euston Road style [Coldstream] hit on a knack of working as if the practice [of painting] were somehow systematic, a game with agreed rules. ... But it’s something of a feint, to say the least. It reveals nothing about what makes a painting come to life, as Coldstream was naturally aware.’ [Julian Bell, *London Review of Books*, 2nd December 2004:23]

It is in the engagement with the material and the negotiation between an artist’s intention and a work’s physical realisation that the possibility of the work as a site of discovery is created.

“I was reminded of the quote by William Carlos Williams, ‘no ideas but in things.’ Michael Ginsborg

Many of the artists involved in the seminar begin a work with the exploration of an external subject. Ian Kiaer stated,

“I generally work thematically, so the subject and ideas are there before the form is determined, yet when I start thinking about a piece there is usually some visual aspect that gets me involved.”

For Kiaer the visual allows him to occupy his subject (for example the work of Frederick Keisler, Wittengenstein or Curzio Malaparte) in a way that his text based studies do not. Kiaer creates a discursive, not solely analytical, response to his subject. The visual lets him simultaneously adopt a range of approaches; critical, metaphorical, mimetic,

suggestive amongst others. The art work allows him to deliberate on his subject matter and perhaps even reach conclusions or make allegiances that are made apparent to the viewer. Paula Kane also takes as her starting point the investigation of a specific visual subject, although included in this is a self reflexive process. She says,

“I currently make paintings of imaginary landscapes and explore themes of genre or what a ‘proper’ landscape painting might be. I’m trying to make work about something I really don’t know very much about, trying to question my preconceptions.”

In this statement Kane seems to be positioning her painting as a repository of (self) knowledge, attempting to probe the artist’s own (and by extension the viewer’s) understanding. Might the term ‘research’, that is an offering of ‘knowledge’, start to become appropriate? How might we quantify or even assimilate this knowledge given the possibilities for ambiguous interpretation? I shall return to the issue of visual knowledge later but here it is important to note that Kane’s process is determined around visual problem solving in a number of stages. She says,

“I play around with images, that become regurgitated, chewed up. I play with materials as well and try to work out the structure of the painting. To some extent, I have a good idea of what the painting is going to look like formally but when I actually start to make the painting I then realise what the problems are. So there is decision making at every stage, before when I make drawings on bits of paper and then a second level of decision making when I actually start a painting. And then the other kind of decision making is how you move from one painting to the next, how you move the work forward.”

Kane’s traditional approach involves sequential stages of development, each offering its own visual problem to be solved on the way to a final resolution. More recently however she has begun to question this hierarchical activity by exhibiting her initial ‘supporting work’ as a ‘studio wall’, alongside her ‘finished’ paintings.

Others describe their work as self-generating. Alison Wilding says,

“I think from the perspective from making work for thirty odd years, that work comes from work. I don’t think it did at the beginning. I think it came from a very different relationship with material and a sort of conflict with myself about how to put things in the world.”

A work's evolution then, does not perform itself discretely but relates the individual work to others, usually the artist's body of work and specific project. By either continuing or discontinuing a line of enquiry, it almost always situates itself in relation to what has gone before. Ideas and forms present in one work may be further explored, resolved, refuted or abandoned in others. Often artists will ‘discover’ something in the work that they wish to explore further. For example Mary Maclean was excited by the ‘indeterminacy of distance and proximity’ within her photographic images stating,

‘This quality became apparent through the methodology and was instrumental in determining a further body of work’.

Artists often work in series or ‘projects’ as this enables them to probe an idea or method over a sustained period. As Beth Harland puts it,

“When I feel that a series is exhausted then I re-frame the question and move on although there is often a sense of returning to something, returning to an earlier idea through a different approach’.

The specificity of the visual material nature of the making can be seen to sustain the artist’s intellectual enquiries. In this way rather than the artist conferring meaning ‘onto’ the artefact she can be viewed as drawing meaning ‘out of’ its physical nature and mode of making.

What we are encountering then is a range of intellectual engagements or modes of thinking during the process. On occasion, when difficulties and doubts about suitable subject matter or procedures arise it may feel as if the medium has come to the artist’s rescue. The artist may ‘suspend’ their conscious deliberations, creating a sense for them that the medium has its own volition and that the work ‘talks back’ to them. Rachel Lowe says,

“Some of my decisions are intuitive...sometimes I don’t know what I want to do. I might see an image which triggers something off...but often I will actually do something physically, like film something or use collage or I’ll change an image which will then lead onto an understanding of what I’m trying to say through the work.”

Michael Ginsborg reports an experience that may appear contradictory, yet in fact reiterates the notion that the physicality of making and looking can, at times, overwhelm the reflective or decisive elements of the process. Ginsborg says,

“...as soon as I’ve taken the tools out of my hands as it were, what happens is that I get all the ideas about what I should do next.”

and many artists report spending a far larger proportion of ‘studio’ time looking at what they have done rather than making. Maria Chevaska attempts to question this perceived dichotomy between thinking and doing by dismantling the either/or relationship between the studio, (where art happens) and life (where everything else happens). She says,

“I reflect everywhere on my work, it stays with me all the time. I want it to remain porous to the world. I’ve always thought painting had a strange distance to anything real and tangible and I have wanted to find a mechanism by which I felt sure that it connected to the rest of your life; debates, events and one’s experiences, including the boring bits. My work is not exclusively made in the studio, it is also made in my head, travelling around, perhaps on the bus or while doing something else.”

However what all three artists seem to be describing is a need for a shift in focus that is a recognisable element in all intellectual endeavour. Indeed Ian Kiaer’s admission that he sometimes has ideas for his art whilst riding his bike reminds me of Virginia Woolf’s writer in *Night and Day* (1919) for whom,

“ideas came to her chiefly when she was in motion. She liked to perambulate the room with a duster in hand... Suddenly the right phrase or the penetrating point of view would suggest itself and she would drop her duster and write ecstatically for a few breathless moments” [need ref?]

A range of types of mental and physical engagement seem necessary in a creative process and it is a matter of intelligence how an artist switches between these modes. For the

visual artist engaged with the making of his or her own work, it appears the making itself not only provides the necessary 'break' from the artist's deliberations but that the work [both physical and mental] that gets done during that time may also be of use to the artist when they apply a more analytical frame of mind. Kane's use of the word 'play' is interesting, as it denotes an undisciplined mental and physical activity that does not require resolution. Rebecca Sitar describes the different levels at which her mind operates whilst she is making her work,

“Words come into the front of my head whilst I am drawing, but I don't want to narrow the process down to simply describing them. ...it's a way of infusing the work with a quality metaphorically associated with the word but at the same time wanting to push the word back, so I'm still engaged with the process and the materiality of making a painting.”

By keeping language at bay, letting it somehow permeate her process without addressing it directly, she seeks to avoid it dominating her making. Maria Chevska describes her process as 'a series of judgements' that are 'intellectual and sensual', both can be located in ideas of 'play' and engagement with material which are particular to the making of visual art. Some artists will experience their process as a cycle of making, reflection, judgement, decision, occurring over different timescales. Other artists report making decisions and judgements of their work, both the specific instant of it before them and their entire oeuvre, as they make it. However it is expressed, what is important here is the dynamic between the work and the artists, who are continually repositioning themselves in front of their object. It is this dynamic that needs to be further explored if we are to increase our understanding of visual intelligence. The way an artist orchestrates the work's passage to completion, will effect both when decisions are made about the work and the nature of those decisions, and so become crucial to further study. In this way the artist's strategic negotiations between the material, intellectual and logistical demands of the work and the originating intentions for the work can be viewed as a series of judgements and decisions demonstrating their visual intelligence. Further case studies of visual intelligence will need to include documentation of individual artists' decision making processes to enable a fuller understanding of the ways in which thinking and making operate together. In particular the choices of how artists makes their art must be viewed in relation to their reasoning whilst making it.

“There is a great expression in James Joyce which is ‘thought through my eyes’, he suggests you see and think at the same moment.....” Maria Chevska

Art doesn't emerge from a vacuum and we have noted its relationship to the world and the artist's own body of work. For the majority of professional artists the work they produce is also borne out of a relationship with other works of art. Although strict notions of genre and tradition may have dissolved, all contemporary artists have an awareness, to differing degrees, of their work's relationship with both historical and contemporary practices and debates. For some artists this is a useful dialogue and sets up a conversation from which the work develops. Beth Harland says,

“I find that sometimes being able to identify a theoretical debate and the sort of terms in which somebody might write about a particular subject can help me give myself a framework.”

This does not mean that the artist sees their visual medium operating in an identical manner to a theoretical debate. Indeed many artists echo Rachel Lowe's feelings,

"I am particularly interested in work which you can't put in words..... you can talk around the work and you can talk about it but you cannot actually translate it into words. I feel that's what keeps me making work, if there is a way I could write down what I wanted to say, then I would write. I think that it is the fundamental core of why I make work."

For some this provides a way of communicating 'through the eyes', that appears to bypass linguistic articulation. When Alison Wilding talks of her sense of fulfilment from looking at a piece of work she admires (either her own or another artist's work) she describes it as a physical sensation.

"For me a good piece of work is when the hair at the back of your neck stands on end when you encounter it. You know you are in the presence of something that is giving you a visceral kick."

This sense of recognition is facilitated by the senses and felt in the body. Michael Ginsborg describes his viewing of a Van der Weyden altarpiece, a painting of a deposition, in similar terms,

"...something happened to one's own whole self, one's own whole body from looking at it."

However as Wilding admitted, this experience of a bodily knowledge may be elusive. Maria Chevska also noted that while these "visceral reactions" or moments of "epiphany" may be "few and far between" artists continue to produce. Although in some artists this may lead to feelings of failure, it provides a goal to strive for and perhaps suggests that a range of engagements are necessary in the production of a work of art, of which this sense physical recognition may be only one. Lowe's interest in making work that cannot be 'reduced' or transposed into language is also driving force in her practice. Both Wilding and Lowe appear to be voicing a desire to use their specific visual and physical media on its own terms, channelling and focusing their particular properties. This aspiration to operate within the specific realm and accounts for the phrase 'visual language' often used by artists. Wilding and Lowe's attendant difficulties draw attention to the flexible dynamic of making and the complexity of a mapping procedure. As Michael Ginsborg says,

"Visual intelligence is about how to deal with aspects of the work which are possibly less predictable and less schematic and have less of a laid down notion of how they can be dealt with."

As I am using the term, intelligence isn't about possessing knowledge, it is about the ways it can be acquired and applied, as demonstrated in the judgements artists make. In relation to an art practice this means that the artist manages the experience of making, 'learns' during the process, as it were. This transaction with the medium centres around a physical encounter with the work. Mary Maclean describes her sensation on viewing her own finished work,

"I usually experience a shock on seeing the final image although I have examined contact sheets, proof prints and test strips. The mis-alignments between what I had expected and what is physically present remains and only adjusts itself after a passage of time."

The quest to direct and harness the potential of the material is infinite and, for most artists, is a compelling part of the process. Maclean continues,

“My understanding of materials is never complete, small or large departures from the expected behaviour nearly always take place.”

In most visual practices this engagement with the medium and its potential to surprise fulfils an important role within the artist’s thinking. When Rachel Lowe discusses the role of ‘intuition’ in her process the concept begins to unravel, yet maintains its usefulness as a catalyst in the work, ultimately bringing her to a point where she is confronted with the particular nature of the work before her.

“I’m much more knowing in my intuition [than I used to be], but I still allow for intuitive decisions. It’s a response to something I’ve seen that might lead to an image in my head – they don’t just come from nowhere, I understand that. Then, when I actually make the work it very rarely looks anything like the image that I had in my head, it changes over the period of making.”

The artist is literally required to see afresh, to make critical judgements about what they have made by becoming the (first) viewer of their own work. Although an artist like Colin Crumplin’s process generates its outcome, he admits to painting the same, final image ‘at least twice’ until the image achieves ‘a certain physical density’ as he is ‘seldom content’ with the first version. Although his practice attempts to avoid making ‘aesthetic judgments’ he willingly admits,

“It seems at least possible that through spending a lot of time looking at paintings I’ve habituated certain judgements of other people and they have become incorporated in what I do.”

Ian Kiaer talks about ‘learning from experience’ when exhibiting his work at certain junctures, but most interestingly he describes how his understanding shifts as he makes work. He often links this changing perception to his use of material.

“I don’t like to be too prescriptive as the work needs a certain openness. This openness is not just to do with a feeling of being incomplete, that things are left unsaid, but also that in the making there is something being found. In this sense the introduction of a new material or a found object that jars the harmony or destabilises the rapport is important. Included in this is a Romantic sense of grace, that something unforeseen can rescue the work.”

These artists then adopt strategies that not only allow them to be surprised by the results of their processes, but also revise their aims and approaches in the light of their ‘discoveries’. To some extent this reinforces myths of heroic, creative struggle with the medium, but it also reflects a very real gap between hypothesis and result. As Kiaer points out, even though the work’s final evolution is unknown, the unforeseen can be used strategically within the process.

“I think moving towards something that is unknown is important. Foucault calls it ‘working at the edge of an un-thought, slowly building a language in which to think it’ Beth Harland

In his persuasive essay, 'On steering clear of creativity' (2004), T. J. Diffey points out the difficulties of the study of creative processes, where we can never know 'how far we have got in our understanding'. In this it differs from scientific research where one would be able to quantify what one has learnt from 'an experiment'. And whilst Jon Thompson has recently,

"invoked George Bernard Shaw's remark that: 'one Shakespeare sonnet has taught us more than every university thesis'." [Paul Glinowski, 'Losing it in translation', *a-n Magazine*, December 2004: 26]

collectively it might be hard to agree on what it is exactly we have learnt from the sonnet, although there may be a general consensus as to the scale of its worth. To return to the notion of visual knowledge then, whilst we may agree with Cezanne or Constable that their work teaches us something about the world, what exactly it teaches us will always be up for debate. The individual nature of the creative enterprise, its inability to make the steps of the process transparent and available and the fact that its worth is constituted in the minds of the individual viewers that separate it from a model of (scientific) knowledge.

Diffey explains the lack of an available predictive model for artistic endeavour,

"To create is to engage in undertakings the outcome of which cannot be known or defined or predicted, though there may be some presentiment of the outcome."
[T.J. Diffey, 'On steering clear of creativity', 2004, *Journal of Visual Art Practice*, 2004, Vol 3 No 2:95]

Although, as I have been attempting to point out, there are identifiable steps and procedures in every artist's process which have evolved through the individual artist's context (ideology, temperament, logistics, choice of media etc), for virtually all artists there will always be some element in the final work that will be unaccounted for. Indeed some artists will consciously adopt strategies to court the unforeseen event. For Rebecca Sitar this means being receptive to new possibilities and directions whilst making the work. She says,

"I need to be incredibly relaxed and focused at the same time, so when words come to mind I acknowledge them, but push them back so that they become background noise, which I draw from when appropriate. That way I can allow for the possibility of something unexpected to be revealed to me."

Although the artist's own sense of discovery is often crucial to their process, it may be that contemporary art practice's scope for surprise has its limitations. As I suggested earlier, it is rare for an artist to step completely outside the parameters they have used to initiate a work. As Michael Ginsborg asks,

"How unforeseen is an unforeseen event? Where does the boundary of possibility come? Having a technique to facilitate unforeseen events is a classic technique of modernist art. The facilitation of unforeseen discoveries is what ran through the whole of the art of the last century, not all artists of course, but unstable techniques, the absurd and the illogical are all about the unforeseen."

However for the artist there remains an anxious sense of the work bringing something previously unknown to the world. Ginsborg describes a feeling of 'helplessness before the object' as he makes and speculates,

"It seems to me none of my work has a foreseen conclusion to it."

and Alison Wilding voices her ambition for the work,

“What I’m trying to do is to make a new thing which is increasingly more and more difficult. I sometimes wonder whether I’m simply repeating or re-making the first object in [my different] streams of work.”

This drive to find something surprising in the work’s resolution is echoed in the artist’s encounter with their materials and processes as I have described above. Perhaps it need not be interpreted so much as a quest for originality, but as a recognition of something exterior to the self, operating in the world independently of the artist, reaching its audience.

The conclusion to a work may be experienced as a resolution, although possibly of a temporary nature. Ian Kiaer describes it as,

“...a moment when a work closes down, that it becomes full, and the individual elements seem to work in an interesting way. At that point I have to decide whether to break the work open again or leave it.”

Interestingly Colin Crumplin uses similar terminology,

“There’s a certain kind of fullness.... that I seem to aim for.”

A recognition of this sought for, yet unknown, quality in the work is a crucial moment in the process. This sense of recognition may be instantaneous, Alison Wilding describes it as ‘to do with the moment’ or take time as Maria Chevska says,

“Maybe a year later I’ll know that it’s finished and it fits in with the family of a group of works.”

Even in its finished state the work’s existence balances precariously. The work may reach a point where it is made public and exhibited and/or documented but then gets taken back by the artist and is re-thought, quite literally recycled. Chevska again,

“I find it invigorating to destroy something in order to remake something’

Alison Wilding states,

“I think the idea of works hanging on for hundreds of years is quite depressing because everything deteriorates, everything decays, it’s the nature of the world we live in’

Although these artists are making real objects that take up space in the world, or perhaps because of it, a reluctance to draw a line under a work seems to dominate. Beth Harland reflected,

“The idea of a piece existing in a certain place and time which is then destroyed is interesting. Howard Caygill speaking at the Tate recently was talking about a work having a certain poise in between its creation and its destruction.”

The fact that contemporary artists seem to enjoy the vulnerable nature of their work, indicates an acceptance of, even a delight in, the material nature of visual art.

Importantly Ian Kiaer notes,

“As artists we are always asked to produce and intelligence is evidenced in the production but I think that resistance to production is also part of the practice of an artist. Stepping back and refusing to make at a particular time is also an important judgement that can be made.”

This occurs elsewhere though perhaps not as a conscious strategy in the way Kiaer describes. Other artists reported ‘creative block’ which halts production and must be overcome. Rachel Lowe describes it thus,

“Sometimes I feel I have a block and I’m not sure how to make the work progress. It’s hard [when] you can’t think what to do, I probably don’t broadcast it, but overcoming it often leads on to something which is revelatory.”

By working through such obstacles the artist affirms the value of their making to themselves and even creates new understandings of their own endeavour. Ceasing to work may be part of the journey of making. In the basic activities of cultural production; originating, making and completing, the artist is making judgements central to their intelligence. That the visual artist in particular, for whom the materiality of the work is fundamental, should be so concerned with its ephemeral nature is hardly surprising. The drive to make the work communicate with the world in the mind of the individual who experiences it, is central to this endeavour and thus the critical reception of a work will become an element in the study of any artist’s visual intelligence.

In conclusion I would like to suggest that ‘visual intelligence’ is a useful phrase. It opens up the possibility of discussion of the way art is produced and allows the artist some agency in that discussion. It can be used to describe the artist’s encounters with, and response to, ideas their work whilst making it. It challenges the assumption that the creative process will not hold up to investigation, that creativity is a bubble that will burst when examined (the example of Hans Namuth sending Jackson Pollock to his grave comes to mind). It also disputes a popular idea that the ‘conceptualism’ of contemporary art eliminates the evolutionary process of making as exemplified by Hugh Rifkind’s response in *The Times* to the fire at the MOMART warehouses in 2004,

“Why can’t Brit Art’s finest devote half a weekend to knocking them out all over again?” [James Meek, 'Art into ashes', www.guardian.co.uk 23/9/04]

Whilst perhaps the destroyed work could be duplicated it is unlikely that most artists would want to do so, mainly because it would hold no interest for the artist, it would be unlikely to engage their visual intelligence.

For the majority of artists, the term ‘visual intelligence’ can be used to describe the relationship they have with their work during the process of making it. Future case studies of individual artists are planned so that their processes can be documented in more detail, than has been attempted here. Some analysis of the methodology this documentation will need to be done but it is hoped that collaborative, innovative and creative ways of documenting artists’ processes will be developed in this later stage of the project. Maria Chevska talks of the paradoxical relationship between the two words,

“The visual in an Aristotelian is the passive mode of perception and intelligence is a work of the mind. For the OED it means the faculty of apprehension, so it’s an active mode of perception. I think that the idea of passive and active is the process by which work gets made, its made through time and through decisions which are both fast and slow”.

She suggests that ‘visual intelligence’ is an “argument between parts that finally works”. It is an argument that needs to be heard.

Rebecca Fortnum, 2005

Notes

- (1) Howard Gardner's study of *Creating Minds* (1993) states that,
"...creative activity grows firstly....between an individual and the object world of work and, second out of ties between an individual and other human beings, [rival, judges, supporters in the field]." [Gardner, *Creating Minds*, (New York, Basic Books,1993): 9]
- (2) A notable exception to this in the UK are the NESTA Fellowships