

# **Art-Making As Embodied Aristotelian Epistemology: Materialized, Enacted, Experienced**

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## ABSTRACT

How does art-making contribute to the philosophical and educational tasks of pursuing understanding, and making sense of life? What are the intrinsic and distinct values of art-making practices?

Just as ethics can be understood as practical philosophy, my experience of making, exhibiting and teaching visual art for the past 25 years has led me to understand art making as embodied, that is materialized, enacted and experienced Aristotelian epistemology. Visual art practices engage in a philosophical inquiry; art seeks understanding, creating and critiquing the sense we make of life by enacting through material and experiential rather than textual means. Herein lies its distinct nature. In a concrete way visual art shows; art, as Dewey phrased it, *constitutes* an experience, creates the art that sometimes life imitates. It seems to me that it is precisely in the engagement in, with and through the physical, embodied, visceral (including digital, sound and time-based) material realm, that visual art can make manifest what discursive language is ill suited to convey. So understood, it is educationally indispensable.

# 1: WE ARE SURROUNDED

## 1.1 Myth Making and Epistemology

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the Western world, I think it is safe to say that we live in a visually bombarded culture. Manufactured images surround us, on walls, billboards, and computer screen, in books, institutions, galleries and homes. Compare our visual immersion with what visual images a medieval person might have seen in one day. Screens are everywhere, in grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, community gyms, bars, even hovering above gas pumps; screens, with their seductive and urgent visuals, leave not one unfilled spot on which to gaze. Screens are portable; hand-held, they can accompany one anywhere, making ours an image or i-generation. Besides these ready made images are the ones generated by our own screen, light generated, retina received, shifting instantly with each minute movement of the head. Images “part before me like the Red Sea and close again in silence, transfigured, wherever I look back” wrapping round and filling, as Annie Dillard points out, literally every space (Dillard, 1974, pp. 29). We are surrounded.

Response to this situation has a long complex history. At a recent conference the otherwise erudite presenter suggested that the visual culture in which we live was a risk, undermining reason itself and risking literacy. The same day on CBC radio I heard Churchill being quoted, responding in horror to the wartime suggestion that arts budgets be slashed to address the budgetary deficit, saying, “For what then are we fighting?”. Then at home, after turning off computer screen, i-phone and TV, discouraged after

hearing of the local schools curricular decision to cut arts programming in favour of business courses, I chanced to see Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes, The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth Century French Thought* on my bookshelf between Plato's *The Republic*, and Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Nearby was a dusty copy of Aristotle's *On Poetics*. Both anxiety and elevation are common responses to the visual, having long roots.

### **1.1.1 Plato's Theory of Knowledge**

Plato's model of knowledge has, of course, one of the longest roots, recommending that artists be banned from his ideal city-state while he himself freely used the poetic art of story-telling, myth making unrepentantly in order to convince. And largely due to his compelling ability to use metaphor, the cave, the line, and the Tale of Er (the ending climax of the *Republic*) come to mind, he tells a convincing tale (Plato, 2000). As he tells it, senses and emotions are well below the elevated apex of rationality; the chains in his cave, like the senses themselves, must be thrown off in order for rationality to be realized. The visual is dangerous, drawing on emotion to fuel its persuasive power and inaccurate being three times removed from ideal Form; it leads astray, away from rather than towards truth. Plato's epistemology has had a long legacy influencing budgets, the academy and curricula today (Eisner, 2008; Richmond, 2002). The point is the pictures we paint of how things are, as Plato so effectively did, are powerful regardless of whether they are named as myth, theory, epistemology, or philosophy.

### **1.1.2 Aristotle's Theory of Knowledge**

Aristotle's picture of how things are is slightly different. Far less well remembered than Plato's, possibly due to the startling absence of metaphor, story or myth in his dense prose, his root is not so well known. Aristotle welcomes emotion and sense into his epistemological model as necessary to complete rationality, as Martha Nussbaum convincingly argues (Nussbaum, 1990). In book six of *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle identified multiplicities of knowing (theoretical, practical and productive); art is significantly included, along with science, practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom, and intelligence, as a means by which truth is attained, not led astray (Aristotle, 1911; Eisner, 2008). Additionally, he secures an indispensable place for the arts in its cathartic role. Art does not just incite, but expiates and expels emotions, cleansing, purging and calming us of experiences. (Aristotle., 2002).

## **1.2 Visuals Construct Us**

At the heart of both this anxiety and elevation is, I suspect, visual images propensity to form us, having enormous effect on identity construction. Largely an unconscious process due to the lack of basic visual literary skills in the population (thanks Plato)- knowing that visuals are powerful does not mitigate its powerful pull. We know that Photoshop manipulations distort the images of models we see in magazines and on billboards, but still are startled when ordinary individuals are presented on screen. First year drawing students routinely recreate these manipulations creating drawings that resemble more closely the anatomically incorrect narrow neck, elongated legs etc., than the human being they are looking at. When I was a student, drawings routinely looked more like the one drawing than the model posing. More devastating is many students

heart-breakingly heroic but misguided re-creation of themselves into this unattainable image attested to by the skyrocketing rates of eating disorders on campus. Legislation in France is being prepared mandating warning signs on digitally manipulated images of models in fashion magazines.

Saturation with images of violence in media and video games is equally disturbing (video games were originally developed by military academies as a means of teaching soldiers to shoot to kill; giving children wide access to such tools surely indicates the need to re-evaluate just what are the guiding assumptions here) and tempting one to reconsider Plato's banishment of artists in a momentary impulse toward censorship. But the blunt tool of censorship is problematic and usually backfires. A more productive path might be in recognising, as I do here, the visual as critical to understanding itself, supporting a widespread and mandatory education in visual literacy especially for this image-driven i-generation.

### **1.2.1 Mirror Effect and Interpellation**

Particularly exploited by the media is the fact that an image of another human being simulates a mirror encounter. Rene Girard's seminal insight is that human beings are at their core mimetic. Looking at an image, as much as a mirror or another living, breathing, human being, we imitate. In his *Politics* Aristotle called imitation natural, that "from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation." (14486-9). Therefore images of the body become significant because they influence identity construction. Bombarded by a certain type of digitally altered body in the media, one's own body begins to look wrong; every year of late, first year drawings document the shifting sands

of what constitutes “normal”. The drawings are evidence of long looking at ready made images of digitally altered human beings, they do not reflect the artist’s mirrored characteristics (as was a previous generations tendency), much less the intended goal of drawing the unique living model in front of their eyes. Visual images are active epistemological tools precisely because they help shape our understanding of “who we are.” Louis Althusser argues that representations form us; create us through interpellation.

*“Ideological systems call out to or ‘hail’ social subjects and tell them their place in the system. In popular culture, interpellation refers to the ways that cultural products address their consumers and recruit them into a particular ideological position. Images can be said to designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be, and in speaking to us as that kind of viewer to shape us as particular ideological subjects.”*(Sturken & Cartwright, 2004, pp.358)

We are shaped unconsciously by these representations then, later with a shock of recognition, see ourselves within those representations. In an older language ‘you become what you contemplate’ conveyed the same truth. Protection of one’s eyes was recommended by carefully considering one’s looking. Images get under our skins in a way that discursive text often does not. Images can construct a false identity or a superficial one. The problem with many of these admittedly beautiful images is that people believe them and try to recreate themselves in these images. Cindy Jackson, for example, has taken this to an extreme, having had twenty-nine operations to transform herself into that cultural icon of beauty, the Barbie doll. Epistemologies, it seems to me, can be acquired through visual, mythic, poetic, theoretical or philosophical means.

### **1.3 Knowledge, Power and Images**

The visual seems to be a particularly powerful epistemological tool that can be co-opted by the consumerist global market economy but can also critique ideologies and subvert media manipulation as publications like Vancouver based Adbusters have done brilliantly for over twenty years. Visual images can construct and deconstruct, create and complicate understanding, all the while making sense of life. Although they can themselves be subverted, they also can be a powerful subversive voice in calling a society to come to its senses. Rather than banishment and censorship as a response to their power, understanding more fully their active capacities and recognising in them a vital component of rationality seems a more reasoned approach.

Models of knowledge have powerful consequences, hinted at by otherwise inexplicable levels of children dying of self starvation and the mystifying rising tide of young adults executing murderous rampages, expiating rage towards other and self. When the time comes to act, Iris Murdock insightfully points out, morality is chiefly a matter of practice. Foucault has forever linked knowledge and power through the image of the panopticon's normalizing gaze of surveillance, illustrating how knowledge and power are negotiated in our society. But especially in a society regulated by knowledge, a (slightly edited) Hopi legend observes, the one who tells the best story [of knowledge] has the most power.

## **2: MEANING MAKING WITHOUT WORDS**

### **2.1 Epistemological Models and Art**

I am not suggesting that visual art be proposed as a technical, philosophical system, recognising with Eisner the less than secure history between the arts and epistemology (Eisner, 2008), rather I suggest inviting art into the epistemological conversation already underway. I have already hinted at reasons for its inclusion given the degree to which we are surrounded by visual images and their unconscious and therefore doubly powerful role in identity construction. The realities of our image immersed and savvy, i-generation makes visual literacy an imperative not a luxury; visual literacy is ignored at a cost. Art is not by itself an epistemological system any more than it is a literal language, but it has a distinct role as a form of intelligence with which we make sense of the world. It has a vital and distinct epistemological role to play.

Although not literally a language or a form of knowing empirically testable through “synthetic propositions whose truth value can be determined” (Eisner, 2008) arts’ knowing resides in its indeterminacy (the wide multiplicity of that which it sparks), permeable boundaries and association with sense, affect, intuition, thinking and imagination. And within art making practices are cultivated spaces for unknowing. It is precisely arts familiarity with perceiving life’s emotion and imagination that constitutes its inclusion within an Aristotelian concept of knowledge. Countering Plato’s theory of knowledge in which he counts the intellect alone as necessary and sufficient for correct choice and condemns emotions and imagination as detrimental to rationality, Nussbaum argues, in concert with Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, that rationality is insufficient without the intelligence emotions and imagination bring. Art is a potent vehicle of both.

Ernst Cassirer believed that a misunderstanding was at the heart of this ancient quarrel that severed philosophy and the arts, which is that philosophy and poetry (and by extension the arts) are both rooted in mimesis and require one another, each having a distinct role to play.

*“Philosophical thought requires the image as the initial means of access to the noetic, and that in the production of philosophy this dialectic of image and idea must constantly be renewed. The key to philosophical education would then ... be aesthetic experience that passes beyond itself and confronts itself in the metaphysical experience of the form.”*(Ilin Bayer, 2006)

## **2.2 Wittgenstein: Propositional Words, Aesthetics and Silence**

*4.021 A proposition is a picture of reality.* (Zwicky, 2003)

Ludwig Wittgenstein agonized about the place of aesthetics in creating his own model of the way things work. Commonly thought to be the greatest philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup> C, Wittgenstein used the technical analytic tools of philosophy brilliantly to parse language not as an end but as a means. In the *Tractatus*, a condensed, series of aphoristic statements (not quite poetry but a beautiful form was one of Wittgenstein’s aims), written in the trenches of WW II, Wittgenstein analyzed how propositional language works, allowing that it expresses things like facts extraordinarily well, but that the structure of language itself limits what can be spoken of- an amazingly prescient observation from today’s vantage point. Most importantly, Wittgenstein’s exploration of the limits of language was largely due to interest in what language cannot express. Paul Engelmann, architect and friend of Wittgenstein explains-

*“Positivism holds- and this is its essence- that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in*

*human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about. When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant, it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean.*"(Zijlstra, 2006, pp.12)

And at the end of the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein identifies aesthetics, ethics and the mystical as constituting this ocean, of utmost importance, that is beyond words.

## 2.1 Knowing without Words

In the end Wittgenstein found a place for aesthetics by referring to it as the ‘more important unwritten second half’ of the *Tractatus*. It “shows from within the limits of language what is important”(Grayling, 2001) Aesthetics and ethics were one, and along with the mystical were unspeakable meaning that Wittgenstein defined what was most important to him by remaining silent about it.(L. Wittgenstein, 1961). He also held that it was entirely possible to know something without being able to say it, implying that there exists more than one type of knowing.

78. *“Compare knowing and saying: how many feet high MontBlanc is-How the word ‘game’ is used- how a clarinet sounds. If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.”* (L. Wittgenstein, 1953,1958, 2001)  
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Not many years later, Michael Polanyi, made a similar distinction between what he called tacit and explicit knowing summarizing in the introduction of *The Tacit Dimension* by saying “we can know more than we can tell.” Integrating subsidiary awarenesses, ranges of conceptual, sensory information and images all contribute to making sense of things and leads to acts of discovery (Polanyi, 1967; 1966, pp.4). Further more, codification need not be into language. Eisner summarizes by pointing out that “it has become increasingly clear since the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that knowledge or understanding

is not reducible to language. ...The liberation of the term knowledge from dominance by the propositional is a critical philosophical move.”(Eisner, 2008)

Wittgenstein grew up in a home that clearly valued the arts and the intellect. The Wittgenstein family home was filled with art and artists, hosting concerts and incredibly rich interdisciplinary conversations amongst a diverse array of intellectual and artistic elites during the last years of Habsburg Vienna. Toulmin and Janik argue that these conversations were key to one of the “most fertile, original and creative periods in art and architecture, music, literature and psychology, as well as philosophy” and played a formative role in Ludwig’s notion of what philosophy was and how to go about it. (Janik & Toulmin, 1996, pp. 6) Sigmund Freud, Arnold Schonberg, Adolf Loos, Gustav Klimpt, Arthur Schnizler, Karl Kraus, Gustaf Mahler, Clara Schumann, Pablo Casals were known to the family and are only a few of the best known luminaries, whose animated cross disciplinary conversations interlinked philosophy and with all aspects of contemporary culture. (Janik & Toulmin, 1996; Kanterian, 2007) This context might shed light on his lifelong discontent with interpretations of his work while at Cambridge and his resistance to philosophy as separate from the rest of life. When frustrated by conversations with Cambridge and Vienna Circle philosophers, he recited passages from Bengali mystic poet and first Asian Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore by heart (Dutta & Robinson, 2009; Janik & Toulmin, 1996) resisting answering their questions, possibly echoing the rich and divergent conversations of the family home of his youth.

A century later in retrospect, perhaps the discontented Wittgenstein might agree with Eisner “one of the major weakness of the logical positivist movement was a tendency...to dismiss poetic and metaphorical language as meaningless utterances.”

(Eisner, 2008, p.9) More attention to Aristotle's root might have softened this dilemma and integrated Wittgenstein's valuing of vital parts of life with the philosophy of Russell's Cambridge.

But though propositional language excludes that which is literally unsayable, it can be made manifest. "There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical."(L. Wittgenstein, 1961) 89 For Stuart Richmond, art, unlike descriptive or propositional language, can show that which is paradoxical and unspeakable, beyond language. He describes the importance of Wittgenstein's "logical itemization of the supposed deep structure of language as relevant for artists today, due to the ineffable quality that can only be shown common to life, ethics, aesthetics, and religion."(Richmond, 2008) Precisely how visual art makes manifest is the question.

### **3: MAKING MANIFEST IN CONCRETE FORM- JAMMED IN A POOL OF MATERIALS**

"One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth's wings vanished in a fine foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouthparts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone, the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work?"

All that was left was the glowing horn of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle’s round pool.

And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth’s body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of identical height, side by side. The moth’s head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out.” (Dillard,17)

The wick’s line is not the only epistemological tool, being itself rooted in wax, a brilliant flame of knowing resides on both wick and moth, both of identical heights. Knowing can be made manifest, can be embodied, materialized, experienced and enacted through the material realm and through material signs. This, I suggest, constitutes visual arts chief distinct value.

### **3.1 Embodied**

*In the studio. Peter is modelling today, an amazing 60-year-old professional model, famous in the art community in Vancouver. He is covered with tattoos and will sometimes vocalize while modelling. This can put people off. He takes his craft very seriously, refusing to be photographed and, due to the reverence he accords to the sacredness of the body, refuses to model draped. He travels on bike all over the lower mainland, no doubt a factor contributing to his flexibility and ability to hold extraordinarily challenging poses for long periods. He arrives, we chat about the notions behind some of the work in progress in the studio, none of which I feel too clear on, and Peter explores some possible poses. I am searching for the pose too, since it is not clear in my mind what I want, but as he cycles through possibilities some resonate and others do not, until there it is. This pose is the one. I know when a pose is right by a kind of intuitive assent resonating in my sternum. We settle on three. I will work sequentially on three prepared surfaces—large 5’ x5’ panels of beautiful Baltic birch, covered with 5 layers of the gesso that I make by heating gelatine and calcium carbonate with water. Today I am working uncharacteristically on an un-sanded surface, matte and absorbent, it takes graphite beautifully— a surface more sensitive than paper— H pencils are silvery with a huge tonal range and B pencils range through to velvety pitch black. They are difficult poses even for Peter to sustain; he holds them for 5-minute intervals cycling between them as I lean each panel in place, one by one. Despite the physical awkwardness of moving the panels we settle into a good working rhythm, conversation trails off, sentences hang unfinished as line turns to form, edges continue, angle, indent and take me on a wordless journey as time drops away. Graphite marks on dry ridges of gesso, hand and erasure smear graduations built with a balance between control and calligraphic gesture. The unfamiliarity of the unsanded surface interacts with*

*the graphite stick in an amazing way, very different to the smooth surface that I am used to. Negative space guides the form and nothing has a name. Form gathers but it is always a surprise, it is not really Peter; when moments of presence appear I try to stop and retain them before it is layered over. My best drawings are sparse and something is expressed with very simple lines. Nothing can be faked with line. It is about listening really. I listen to my hand, my awareness indwelling the pencil tracing lines over ridges of gesso, listening to the form in front of my eyes exploring unrecognizable angles, intersections, distances, all edges never seen before. When I am drawing I am unaware of myself, and silence is palpable. It is in these moments of silence that I feel most fully alive.*

First of all we are embodied creatures having material existence and sensory responses to the world around us. We taste and touch, hear, smell and think, all, through our material bodies. We are ourselves material. We have complex, multilayered interior as well as exterior worlds. We are embodied within languages, cultures, histories, contexts, and communities. We are subjects constantly negotiating, forming and being formed by a vast ocean of sensory data, intellectual influences, powerful cultural, societal and historical tides, tacit and explicit swells, conscious and unconscious perceptual undercurrents, emotions, intuitions, thoughts, memories, actions and dreams.

We are each “alive in our own skins” and fragile. Art is inextricably linked to the subjectivity of the artist; a living breathing, perceiving, thinking and feeling human subject is indispensable, without which, the product cannot be named as art. Art requires intelligence, drawing on theory, history, ideas etc.; a real, creative, feeling, embodied subject is equally necessary. For Stuart Richmond, in “life, relationships, ethics, art, aesthetics, a creative feeling subject is necessary. There has to be a life behind a work of art or it could not be recognised as such.”(Richmond, 2008, pp.84) Subjectivity is recognising ones own voice- but for Gao Xingjian, it is a voice of an ordinary, perhaps more sensitive than normal, frail individual who feels. It is weak but authentic, “a small inconspicuous stance taken by an individual.”(Xingjian, 2008, pp.47) Subjectivity in art

is about honesty and does not include righteous representation of ideals, being a spokesperson, prophet or producing propaganda. Frail human beings sometimes know and sometimes do not know, and both ways can be productive. Trusting, welcoming, bodily cues is a sure guide through it all. So is welcoming unknowing.

For Merleau-Ponty knowing is a bodily affair. It is vital “not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder.”(Abram, 1996, pp. 47) The body is not a closed set of predetermined mechanisms but an active and open system constantly adjusting and readjusting in relation to experiences; the body perceives, is receptive and responds reciprocally. For Merleau-Ponty, things are not passive, they are described in the active voice, and hence a sympathetic relation exists between the perceiver and the perceived. Perception is a mutual interaction, ‘participation’ *with* things entailing synaesthesia, a fusion of all the senses. Perception, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, is a heightening of awareness and an animation or re-sacralizing of world.(Abram, 1996)

This resonates with experiences in the drawing studio. The drawing curriculum is itself an apprenticeship in perception, giving freedom within certain bounds to explore, the directed honing of attentiveness heightens embodied subjective awareness and results in having an altered experience with time, taking the student beyond herself to attend to what is outside and other. Often the other that is being attended to is perceived as invested with presence in a way similar to Heidegger’s descriptions. Also reminiscent of Heidegger’s work is the experience of time as extra-ordinary, as extended or suspended and as ‘ecstatic’.

## 3.2 Materialized

*In the studio. Today I just happened to put a drawing beside a plate of steel leaning against the corner of the studio and was stunned at how the steel changed the drawing. It made the figure so much more fragile, and flesh-like, but also stronger. I had been frustrated, unsatisfied with the painterly direction of the surface. Layering drawings with gold leaf, encaustic and gestural marks of oil paint had created a beautiful but somehow too organic, boneless surface; the surface was lush, but not in a good way. I found more plates of steel and began juxtaposing planes of this material with drawn figurative surfaces and in each case the encaustic surface was transformed. The contrast of steel with the beeswax figurative surface heightened the corporeal presence of the piece. The steel gave the figure bones.*

### 3.2.1 Expressed, Formed Content

Subjectivity is expressed, is materialized with almost anything. Nearly anything at hand will do- graphite, clay, cathode tube, pigment, ash, lead, maps, receipts, steel, definitions, x-ray, wood, tar, fog machines, digital signals, sound waves, space, time... Art is materialized within recalcitrant, often unpredictable, always elusive but usually grounding material matter.

It is in the collision between self and world, inner and outer that art arises. Artists give concrete form, give expression to their subjective (perceiving, emoting, thinking) selves, respond through thoughts, theories, views, responses, intuitions- clear and inchoate, to their context (the world they find themselves in), by condensing vast quantities of information into something intelligible. For Gao Xingjian it is the “ultimate crystallization of human civilization [and is] inherently man’s affirmation of his own self worth... [The artist] gives concrete form to his perceptions.”(Xingjian, 2006, pp.35, 44)

Material sentient beings that we are, we see divergent interconnections and from passionate excitement something is kindled and is pressed out, given expression and concrete form through the material realm. “Unless there is com-pression nothing is ex-

pressed.” (Dewey, 1934)(66) But feeling and emotion alone do not constitute art. Expressiveness is not just discharging emotion but the disciplined use of the ‘visual language’ of the elements, principles, and theories of art. Art is the crystallization, refinement and intensification of everyday experiences, but it does not just refer to experience, it *constitutes* one. Ideas and feelings take on form. (Dewey, 1934) There are no rules for this retrieval and forming process. Works of art give us ways of organizing and expressing our thinking about ourselves and our worlds.” (Lyas, 1997, pp.101)

Friedrich Schiller considered the mind's ability to create order from chaos-to see form, as the basis of making sense of things, what he called the formal impulse. “To the fulfilment of this twofold task, of bringing what is necessary *within* us to reality, and subjecting what is real *outside us* to the law of necessity, we are urged by two contrary forces which, because they impel us to realize their object, are very properly called impulses.”(Schiller, 1954, pp.64) The formal impulse is shown in, is necessary to, our ability to conceptualize, perceive, and create imagery and beauty.”(Richmond, 2009, pp. 7)

For Susan Langer the form an artist creates is an analogue for the feelings that human beings experience. Through form what language is ill suited to communicate can be shown. Following on Wittgenstein and Cassirer's work, Langer saw art as primarily expressive of “not feelings and emotions the artist *has*, but feelings which the artist *knows*”(Eisner, 2008, pp.7) Around the same time Rudolf Arnheim combined gestalt psychology with art and visual perception. He observed that art echoes the mind's functioning, “The mind always functions as a whole. All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention... vision is not a mechanical

recording of elements but rather the apprehension of significant structural patterns.”

(Arnheim, 1974, pp.5-6) Every semester analogue drawings are a revelation to students and are the hinge for their understanding composition and the ability of ‘nonrepresentational’ form to spark meanings while still being permeable and flexible, a Wittgensteinian family resemblance, a guide not a precise proof or rule. Consistently and cross culturally, students see a remarkable collective connection between their spontaneous markings to each word I announce. “Anger, joy, disease, exhilaration.” I still think about the student who said “I have never felt happiness”. We are ourselves material and respond in like manner to gravity. Forms ‘deep structure’ materialize every semester. But even so, there are no rules and as each student progresses, each will realize their own unique way to analogously express what is within them. Richter summarizes and simply says, “Painting is applied epistemology.”(Richter & Obrist, 1995)

### **3.2.2 Thinking through materials-**

Just as the body is inescapable and intelligent, its material existence containing the capacity for decoding and expressing, so too is the wider material realm of which it is a part. Materials themselves carry an internal physical miraculous intelligence, and are additionally encoded with layers of culturally specific meanings that ‘speak’ independently of the artist.

*“Everything exceeds its name” says Tim Lillburn, “insofar as the named world is coterminous with the finite world, everything is infinite. The weight of everything, its home, where it is itself, lies beyond naming, lives outside the range of calculation, is not, if to be is to possess a name. The mysterium of the physical world is a theophany of what is not there, that is beyond the calibrations of that erect “thereness”. Thus as John Scotus Eriugena says, “no substance or essence of any creation, whether visible or invisible, can be comprehended by the intellect or by reason as to what it is (Periphyseon,443B)” (Zwicky, 2003, 53R)*

Wittgenstein remarked in the *Tractatus* near the end of his 6<sup>th</sup> proposition that “It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists”(L. Wittgenstein, 1961); In *Culture and Value* he describes the ordinariness of life as being made significant by artists, “capturing the world *sub specie aeterni*”, [and that] man has to awaken to wonder-and so perhaps so peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again.”(L. Wittgenstein, 1980, pp. 5e) Wittgenstein continues saying the artist can help show, can help make manifest, “A poet’s words can pierce us” (Zwicky, 2003, pp. 55R)

The point is that ordinary material is never mundane, that within the material realm is so much more than we can ever grasp, ever contain with intellect alone, although it must be said that what the intellect extracts is not to be diminished. Aristotle understood knowledge as a deep honouring of concrete material existence, and its wisdom can be expressed in a multitude of ways, through numerous wicks. The layers adhering to material can accompany symbolic re-creation of feelings (that are, we are reminded by Nussbaum, essential to rationality) and can spark ideology, discourse, can denote a literal meaning or connote the layers and complex associations of cultural and historical meanings. Like Nusbaums insistence that “style makes its claims,” form (whether literary or literal) is inseparable from philosophical content. Form, by its careful selection itself conveys the content it wishes to announce.

### **3.2.3 Within a Context**

*In the studio. Went to Welding and Engineering today, a cement truck fabrication plant off Terminal drive in Vancouver. It is in the light industrial area close to the VIA train station and the infamous Main street strip of seedy hotels and addicts pawning every conceivable product in the alley behind the hotels. The steel workers thought I was crazy as I carefully paged through 8’ x 4’ plates of 12 and 16 gauge steel out in their yard. I am stunned, and made speechless by the watermark patterns etched into the mill scale on the surface of the steel. I was thinking of using the steel as a negative symbol of industrialization but this notion*

*is being transformed in front of my eyes by the materials sheer beauty. I learn that the steel is itself very sensitive, a hand-print placed on unsealed steel will etch into it, emerging inexorable as a rusted shape over the coming month. Human etched steel.*

In Wittgenstein's late work, the *Philosophical Investigations*, he sees language as responsive to context, meanings shift depending on the 'language game' being played. For Wittgenstein, Peirce and Saussure, context is crucial and like a game of chess, the codes and conventions, the rules of the particular language game determine specific meanings, requiring interpretation. "Here the term language-*game* is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life." (Zwicky, 2003, pp.19R) But words are not the only 'language game' in town. Materials too are signs- made up of the literal signifier and the myriad complex layers of understandings, connoted and denoted; intended and unintended that is signified. There are no innocent materials, no less than eyes. The direct use of signifiers in art, and here I am thinking of Brian Jungen's culturally coded double appropriation of Nike running shoes, Tim Hawkinson's football field sized installations and Ann Hamilton's uncanny and prelinguistically perceived performance/installations, unleash meaning from material objects themselves. "Suppose someone said: every familiar word, in a book for example, actually carries an atmosphere with it in our minds, a corona of lightly indicated uses," (L. Wittgenstein, 1953,1958, 2001, pp. 155), Wittgenstein's corona can be usefully applied to the multiplicity of lightly indicated uses encoded into materials. Art expresses through material, but since materials bring their own intelligence with it, expression is a dialogue rather than a monologue. Working with material is not a tame pursuit; frolicking in what is incompletely known is dangerous territory, unknowably unleashing the unpredictable.

Jan Zwicky sees metaphor as essential to how understanding is realized. In the foreword to *Wisdom and Metaphor* she writes: “This is because the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom; what a human mind must do in order to comprehend a metaphor is a version of what it must do in order to be wise. But of course we are not wise in a vacuum; we are wise about things, situations, people, the world. Thus, [her] book argues, those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world.”(Zwicky, 2003) And in response I understand that art is a form of understanding that through it’s embeddedness in material, understands through material, and in so doing the artist’s process echoes the shape of the world.

### **3.3 Enacted, Experienced, Understood**

*In the studio continued. The more attentive I am to the steel the more my idea is transformed and if I am wise I will follow the material rather than imposing my original and admittedly superficial idea onto it. The discovery of this material is exhilarating. Materials carry meaning. And therefore the meaning of body is extended over steel wax, ash, and lead, meanings ranging from precious to toxic. Pairing the figurative encaustic planes with the steel I feared would be confining but the play with and against gravity, with and against the boundaries and limits of the steel is oddly not confining the figure but freeing it somehow. The structure seems somehow the antidote to the overly lush, organic surface that was bothering me so much previously. The materials themselves are the means of instruction and the work seems stronger by attending to this.*

As Dewey said “Art constitutes an experience” but it can work both ways. The artist enacts an experience for the viewer but can also be acted upon by the materials. Non-linear, associative, divergently drawing on ideas across disciplinary silos, integrating subsidiary awarenesses, ranges of conceptual, sensory information and untameable material, all contribute to making sense of

things and lead to acts of realization. The codification need not happen in textual language, or rather it can erupt in any language, a visual one no less than a textual one. Meaning is realized, is enacted through the working process itself and is received actively by an equally complex viewer; meaning is not read, but is negotiated, experienced, a more indeterminate, porous and permeable 'text' open to the associative input of the equally complex viewer. The spectator brings her own world to the interpretive table adding to the creative act, acknowledging also the presence of synaesthesia between spectator and presented artwork. Art, like language is involved in a triadic relationship between artist, object, and spectator; a quadratic relationship if one considers the context separate from the artist, spectator and work of art. In this complex interlayered four-dimensional interaction between artwork, maker, receiver and context multiple meanings are realized and welcomed.

The reception completes the piece, also an active process, understanding generating its own forward momentum. "But there is also *this* use of the word "to know"; we say, "Now I know!"—And similarly "Now I can do it!" and "Now I understand!" ...(such as sensation is, for example, that of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is slightly startled.)(L. Wittgenstein, 1953,1958, 2001, pp. 51;Zwicky, 2003) For Zwicky, a poet, as for most artists I suspect, the experience of seeing is a species of understanding. We say in such cases not only that we recognise x(as y), but we realize x is y. "Understanding is always the experience of a gestalt- the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or re-perception of a whole."(Zwicky, 2003, pp. L2) In textual

conversation with Wittgenstein, “I think it could also be put this way: astonishment is essential to a change of aspect. And astonishment is thinking.”(Zwicky, 2003, pp.1R) For poet, artist and viewer, understanding art happens in a flash (but for the maker, after the 10,000 hours) and generates the feeling of momentum. It transports us, evokes vicariously, powerfully into knowing.

Art is an epistemological tool, as Cassirer says, an invented form of deliberate self-knowledge, and as Aristotle affirmed a means by which truth is attained. What previously we had no words for is made manifest. What is art’s value? To show, to make manifest, to realize, what one only inchoately, vaguely has intimations of- *“to flare up like flame and make big shadows”*, as Rilke puts it, that can be moved in.(Rilke, 1996, pp. 88) To create images that others recognize as their own that release understanding, that make sense of one’s life.

#### **4: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS**

Art-making practices are enacted by an embodied maker, made manifest through the material experiential realm and are received through another body, creating a web of culturally mediated affective, sensory and intellectual encounters. Art expresses in materialized experiential rather than propositional language, enacting its encoded semiotic meaning making. Art is an imaginative translation of the encounter of a conscious being with their environment into an intelligible form. It is an active epistemological tool that transports, a form of understanding

that completes and enacts rationality and is, I suggest, indispensable to the philosophical and educational task. Pictures of how things work exert enormous influence and exact a high toll, creating serious consequences for how people understand themselves, influencing choices people make. Epistemologies can be acquired through visual as well as intellectual means. Visual images do not just allow access to the noetic they themselves are.

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