



Figure 1 Dress One with hand-woven seams. Front detail.

Seaming, Writing, and Making Strange: between material and text

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Abstract

Although prevalent in the process of practice-led research for the arts, uncertainty and ambiguity seem to be most powerfully present in the transaction between material and textual elements. This article discusses the productive aspects of ambiguity emerging in the process of translating the experience of making into a communicable language, and how this productivity can be heightened by the materiality and corporeality involved. In the course of the physical and emotional process of making, an ‘empathetic’ relationship can develop between the maker-researcher and the ‘body of work’—the artefact-in-process, documented material, fragmentary texts being put together, etc.,—maximizing the ‘stranger effect.’

Through the author’s own experience of oscillating between making and reflecting, this article aims to demonstrate how the practice of practice-led research can complicate the arrival at certainty, or settled knowledge, enriching the outcome as a result.

KEYWORDS: materiality, documentation, ambiguity, defamiliarization, seamless

Reading Instruction

The textual structure of this article is in two halves: please read it with the odd-numbered pages on the left-hand side, and even-numbered pages on the right-hand side. (The two-page-view on Adobe Reader or Microsoft Word works well). This formalism is deployed in order to integrate, into the article, the sense of the research process being led by the creative practice. Each page of ‘explanation’ (ex-planare, unfolding) is preceded, in space, by a page of documented photographs, which record the creative process as a form of implicit, or enfolded, knowledge.



Figure 2 The process of hand-weaving the seam.

Introduction

The relationship between material and textual components in practice-led art and design research is a complicated one. This is especially the case with “research *for* the arts,”¹ following Christopher Frayling’s categorization, where the radical approach does not fit in neatly with the more conventional academic research: the research need not even start with specific research questions, but may have emergent ones during the process, and relevant methods can also emerge accordingly (Frayling, 2008). Although this is partly due to the lack of existing models and archives from which current researchers can derive their rules and procedures, there exist unique advantages to this approach, a few of which I hope to demonstrate in this paper.

Academic research in general prioritizes the process over the result or fact found in the end. In research *for* the arts, however, the importance of process is particularly emphasized, as the thinking and new knowledge are embodied in *the body of work*, which includes the artifacts, notebooks, materials in progress, and informed textual appraisal of what’s been achieved (ibid., 2008). Simply put, the entire process and its documentation form an integral part of the final output.

In my research, the material-making—making a series of “seamless” hand-woven garments—was documented in the forms of note-taking, drawings, photography, and sound or video recording, in order to capture the tacit, non-verbal, and emotional aspects of the “action.” This documentation was followed by repeated reflection as “reaction,” through “free-writing” as well as more structured writing. The research itself developed in a fragmented and non-linear manner in accordance with, and making use of available circumstances, and was often led by instinctive judgments and assumptions without apparent causal connections, as is often the case in artistic practice. In becoming aware of the probability that not being in complete control of the process can be advantageous to the overall research, I at times intentionally complicated the process, or made detours, maximizing the play between in- and out-of-control situations. By taking detours rather than shortcuts, the state of uncertainty was prolonged. The particular emphasis on the process in research for the arts entails taking advantage of this ambiguity notwithstanding the anxiety that inevitably comes with uncertainties.

The entire body of work in my research therefore lets slip this fragmented, uncertain, ambiguous, anxious, and emotional process. In this paper, however, it is through the relationship between the material artifacts and the textual components being made that I aim to reveal the productive aspects of uncertainties prevalent in practice-led research *for* the arts.

If the process of research is the repeated oscillation between making and reflection, between action and reaction, the seams in my research materialize the fragility of meaning, when the maker tries to make sense of her own making. In attempting to translate the evanescent experience into a more settled and communicable form, the fragility of newly arising meanings can be intensified because of the materiality of cloth: it is simultaneously *self-like* (in constant contact with skin, hence “empathetic,” naturalized, and “compliant” to the hand and needle) and also *Other*, the radically heterogenous matter out of control (with which any hands-on maker is familiar). This uneasy state of confusion and ambiguity, however, fascinates the maker, spurring the continuous iteration of making and its interpretation, which is a meaningful process all on its own.



Figure 3 Flared Skirt. Hand-woven side seam. detail (in process)

Making “seamless” woven garments entirely by hand proved to be a demanding yet especially productive method of investigation, on account of its slow and laborious process, its “strangeness,” and the materiality and corporeality involved. It reveals how the practice of practice-led research complicates and hinders the arrival at certainty, or settled meanings, enriching the knowledge produced as a result.

The use of anthropological references in this paper is intended to highlight the sense of displacement and identification experienced in the process of research, and also to bring to light the shortfalls of rational scientific methods in studying human endeavor, especially that of material-making. Anthropological fieldworkers find themselves in foreign lands “awash in floods of otherness and daydream of home” (Taussig, 2011, p.26). Their method of participant observation is “seeing from the inside as well as from the outside and translating between” (ibid., p.133). Having experienced being a stranger to myself during the oscillation between making and reflecting, I often find anthropological texts helpful in articulating my own experience of estrangement and the ensuing emotional responses that are generally overlooked in researches carried out from a third person point of view.

Neither a seam nor seamless

The garments are entirely made by hand: it is a long and laborious process of purposefully fraying the edges of industrially woven cloth, and then reweaving the frayed strands into another edge of cloth, resulting in a “linking surface” as sturdy as the selvage of cloth. I find it difficult to tell if the linkage is a seam, or if it is seamless. Visually, it shows a contagion-like transition simultaneously drawing and dissolving the boundary between the meeting edges. Structurally, the seam, or the surface, is a doubling, trebling, or sometimes quadrupling of the original layer.

Weaving through the cloth, repeatedly seeing the needle piercing the cloth and then immediately touching my skin, out of sight underneath the cloth, is a synesthetic and visceral experience. I feel as if the hands, material, and tools are repeatedly being merged and separated, the boundary permeable and impermeable, continuously becoming: I *become* the skin, the fingertips, the cloth, the frayed edge in contact with the needle. This making process presents my skin and myself to me as a permeable surface, which can be disrupted, patched, and modified, akin to the cloth I am holding and handling. The visceral quality of making prevents the material from being a mere representation, and it is instead experienced as the edge of the self. The amount of stitches used in these seams is utterly disproportionate, which makes the seam far sturdier than it ever needs to be. Having stayed on the fraying edge, however, I find it reassuring and empowering. The fragility of the edge and the excessively sturdy woven-in seam “set up a complex tension, whereby the boundary’s permeation and its reinforcement happen within the same symbiotic movement” (Spooner, 2004, p.11). Repeatedly fraying and restitching the edges, I experience my bodily self as the contaminable and manipulable garment, yet at the same time, I feel that its integrity must be kept intact at all costs.

According to James Frazer’s (1920) anthropological study of sympathetic magic, clothes are one of the archetypal charms that combine the principles of homoeopathic and contagious magic. Making garments by seaming this way, I feel as if I am constructing a

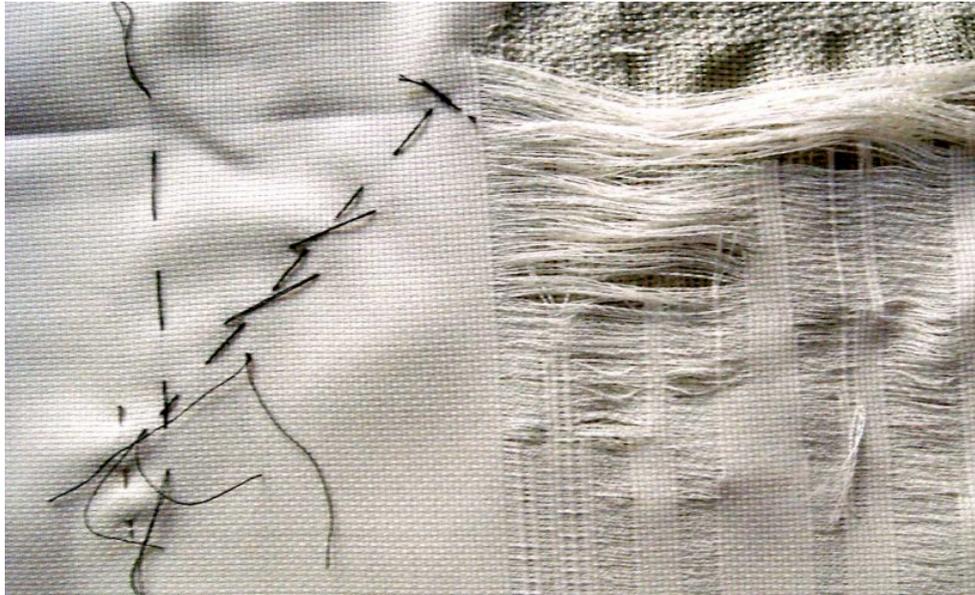


Figure 4 Dress Two with hand-woven seams. (in process)

Figure 5 Dress One with hand-woven seams. (in process)

double, or a mimetic copy of myself. Or else, when I make the seam, I *am* the seam: I am *making myself*. Occurring along with the movement of the needle, in and out of the cloth, is the perpetual mimetic “contagion” between the maker and the material, the bodily process of knowing the unknown. Also occurring with the act of seaming is the known becoming unknown: the naturalized, hence invisible boundaries are made strange, uncertain, and doubtable. Identification and displacement take place in tandem. The weaving hands dissolve the boundaries between maker and material, between self and other, between inside and outside, replacing the distinction with the constant movement of transition.

Experienced in such a way, the garment is a tangible reality at hand that can be modified and transformed. The garment, then, is not just a container that separates inside and outside, but also a perpetual *movement* that mobilizes the transition of the self, others, and their link, through the process of identification and displacement. We constantly generate our “selves” through believing *and* doubting this surface, boundary, or seam.

As the negative mold of the body and the con-taminated (Latin *con-* + *tangere*) surface in constant contact with the body, garments are the imprint of making and wearing bodies. Precisely because of this *self-like* quality, the garment emerges at certain moments as an intensely potent *other*, impossible to articulate. The powerful estranging moments are triggered by the corporeal movement and the heterogeneity of the material. The material interrupts the automatic object-sign link and its existing meaning is deferred, rendered ambiguous. This state of uncertainty, or confusion (*confundere*, to mingle together), turns the object into an agency, which acts on the maker or wearer. In making by hand, the heightened “kinship” between the maker and material aids both immersion in, and emergence from, the making.

This ambiguity, uncertainty, or confusion that the act of making can induce in the maker is greater when the making is not an exact application of pre-existing ideas and when the maker allows herself to deviate from the initial plan. The particular challenge, and also advantage, of material-making is the unpredictable contingencies brought on by the material out-of-control and indeed the *maker* out-of-control. Being skilled, it seems to me, is knowing how to let go of control when the material becomes too “compliant,” in order to take advantage of the increased uncertainties.

The edge of what I have become

In an attempt to capture the actuality of making during the repeated oscillation between making and reflection, I diligently document the process. The material, visual, and textual documentation is intended as the evidence of my experience, a means of retrospective reflection, and of my authority as the maker. The actuality, however, seems always to escape. At the very moment of recording, inevitably done from a particular temporal, spatial, personal viewpoint, the deformation of actuality starts. On the rereading in later stages, the documented material appears to be as “alive” as my memory and I need to repeatedly weave through the gap between what is recorded and what I remember. This process is a strange mixture of convincing myself that I can faithfully capture the experience of making, and doubting my own perception and memory. In his book *I Swear I Saw This* (2011), Taussig reminds us of what Barthes calls ‘the interstices of notation,’ a



Figure 6 Dress One with hand-woven seams. Side view detail.

strange mechanism at work on rereading a typically mundane diary entry that makes Barthes recall the grayness of the atmosphere precisely because it is not recorded (Taussig, 2011, p.117). In this respect, a maker-researcher's work journal can be a deeply unsettling vehicle: the once trustful companion who was always at hand, patiently listening to my inarticulate rambles, complaints, or commands, turns into a stranger who only communicates in ambiguous oracular responses. "How something could be so much a part of you and so alienating as well?" (ibid., p.25)

I would compare this deformation of actuality and the resulting unsettling feeling, with the sense of being in the labyrinth that anthropologist Tim Ingold analyses in *Lines: A Brief History* (2007). In this book, Ingold roundly categorizes lines into threads and traces: a thread is a line without a surface, whereas a trace is a line with a surface (Ingold, 2007, p. 41-3). But in reality, Ingold writes, each stands as a transform of the other:

It is through the transformation of threads into traces, I argue, that surfaces are brought into being. And conversely, it is through the transformation of traces into threads that surfaces are dissolved (ibid., p.52).

The labyrinth or maze, in particular, is the spatialized instances when the surface or ground disappears, that is when traces are transformed into threads. Leading off with the story that Daedalus, the artificer of the Labyrinth of Knossos, is alleged to have modeled it upon the maze that leads to the Underworld, Ingold introduces the maze of the Chukchi (of northeastern Siberia). Whereas the living, in making their way in the world, follow the *traces* left by their predecessors upon the surface of the earth, the dead have to *thread* their way through its interstices: through holes in the ground as pathways, the dead enter into the maze full of intricate passages. Fully enclosed within the earth, without the perception of walking upon solid ground beneath their feet, the dead are unable to see where and when paths diverge (ibid., p.53). This utter state of confusion, however, is not something unfamiliar to the living. Well-trodden paths or traces, much less an aerial perspective of them that reveals the overall layout of "the maze," are not always available to a journeying wayfarer—a journey on a par with the making process, its documentation, and its translation. The entrance to "the maze" marks the point at which the wayfarer goes "underground." Thus at the very moment of entering the maze, the surface itself appears to dissolve. Every path is now a thread rather than a trace, and the maze of passages is never visible in its totality (ibid., p.56).

This conversion of traces into threads and the consequent dissolution of surface are akin to the sense of estrangement that inevitably accompanies a reflexive researcher. As I try to be an objective, detached observer calmly watching my other making selves being documented, the boundary between the self and other becomes blurred and the stable act of perception separating a subject become unsettled.

The deformation of actuality, the sense of loss, and ensuing ambiguity of meaning deepens during the attempts to translate the bodily, material knowledge into a more communicable medium of language. As a continuous reaction to the photos, drawings, or fragments of thoughts jotted down in my work journal, I try to write more organized texts—cooler, more objective, and reader-friendly ones. Yet the more I write, the more I get this feeling that the writing is actually pushing reality off the page, closing off the contingent, or the particular (Taussig, 2011, p.6; 16). As Richard Sennett puts it, in *The Craftsman*:



Figure 7 The process of hand-weaving the seam.



Figure 8 Flared Skirt. (in process)

[Material making] establishes a realm of skill and knowledge perhaps beyond human verbal capacities to explain; [...] language is not an adequate “mirror-tool” for the physical movements of the human body (Sennett, 2008, p.95).

Although the attempts at translation almost always fail and the text is rife with imperfections, writing as a reaction to making seems to have productive aspects. By the act of writing, the seemingly habitual and repetitive aspects of making are perceived in a new light and an unusual way, as something worth reflecting on and writing for. Just as the omnipresent and taken-for-granted garment seam is made strange by the act of seaming in an unconventional way, the gap between linguistic and non-linguistic knowledge enhances the stranger effect. This is a reminder of Ingold's labyrinth, a powerful image of movement and wayfaring that lies beneath the surface of the world of quotidian experience (Ingold, 2010, p.20), letting us experience the ordinary in an extraordinary way. The process of reflective practice is thus experiencing the continuous transformation between trace and thread, the surface appearing and disappearing. My seaming stitches are the materialized threshold, the surface of transition, the process of reflective practice spatialized and temporalized, measurable, stitch by stitch. Making sense of my own making, therefore, is to reveal the fragility of meaning: it is a form of making in itself, and another dimension of knowing, which spurs the iterative process of making objects and making sense.

Reflective making as shamanic practice.

My seaming process is thus a prolonged state of *unknowing*. It reveals the act of making as an estranging process that is not always apparent in conventional ways of making. It is this constant state of *deferral*, residing in the gap between non-sense and meaning, that Taussig discusses in his essay, 'Viscerality, Faith and Skepticism: another theory of magic' (2006), through descriptions of magical healing rituals extracted from various early ethnographic records. Questioning the boundary between trick and technique, between magic and science, Taussig suggests that magic works through a strange mixture of belief in, and doubt of, the world bereft of trickery (Taussig, 2006, p.128).

Most of the rituals described involve the repeated movement of some objects being extracted from, and inserted into, the human body, as if weaving through and in-between the bodies of the people involved. I find marked similarities between Taussig's descriptions, and the visceral quality of making garments by hand: first, there is the manipulation of the shaman or patient's body, whose boundary has to be traversed. At the moment of a conjuring trick, the bodies seem to be rendered unstable and transparent (ibid., p.127). Then there are “the exceedingly curious objects,” supposedly withdrawn from the interstices of the human body: they mark the exit from and re-entry into the body. This has a “remarkably indeterminate quality”—such as “the white feathers of newborn birds shaped like a puppy,” or the semi-transparent dough revolving at high speed—“all acting like extensions of the human body and thus capable of connecting with, and entering into other bodies, human and nonhuman” (ibid., p.127). Taussig stresses a capacity on the part of these objects “for an implosive viscerality that would seem to hurl us beyond the world of the symbol” (ibid., p.128). At certain moments of the ritual, the bodies and the objects both become “movement”—the movement of mimesis as “a sort of, streaming metamorphicity,” turning “totally plastic and protean, in a rush of becoming other” (ibid., p.140). Taussig says that the fluid gestures made by performing shamans, and the movement of the objects going in and out of the body, are akin to



Figure 9 Dress Two with hand-woven seams. Front detail.

weaving in and out of this and other realities (ibid., p.142).

Intensified by the viscosity and corporeal movements involved in rituals, these descriptions accentuate the *doubt* of the existing boundary, or “the stranger effect” that occurs during the process of making, and its interpretation. Taussig explains that although a great part of shamanistic procedure is a fraud, the exposure of fraudulence does not weaken people’s belief in shamanism. There is an unwavering ideal of the truly endowed shaman: but as one never knows whether any particular shaman is a cheat or not, faith in any practitioner is tempered by skepticism. This mixture of doubt and belief also exists in the shamans themselves: most are doubters, avidly debunking the tricks of others and even their own, but they still believe in the magic itself and yearn to learn the “real ways of shaman.” “The exposure of the trick, therefore, is no less necessary to the magic of magic, than is its concealment” (ibid., p.129).

The visceral shamanic performance and the sense of the beyond enhanced by the ever-present doubt, seem to find a parallel in my practice: in the sense of the boundary between the skin and the cloth dissolving, in the sense of the unknown that is continuously evoked by the act of seaming, and in the slippery process of interpretation due to the hermeneutic gap that opens on rereading journal entries.

Material-making is the process of mimetic interaction with the material, overstepping the boundary between self and other. During this process, the maker becomes aware of the otherness of the self, as well as the self in others. In this way, making constantly generates the unknown in the process of knowing: the material and the maker mutually generate ‘the magic of the ritual.’ Therefore, making—whether seaming, self-fashioning, or interpretation—is “shamanic” in that it is an endlessly *enfolding* process, aiming at the unattainable catharsis of revealing the truth, the authentic self, perfect skill, or settled meaning. “In its unmasking, magic is in fact made even more opaque” (ibid., p.146).

Invisible seams in scientific methods

The comparison between my research and shamanic practice is intended to accentuate the “non-rational” forms of knowledge: a form of bodily knowing through “empathy” with others that emerges from the manipulation of, and is articulated on, the garment surface. The seaming process aptly reveals the garment not as a superficial layer hiding something underneath or behind, but as a constant *movement* that mobilizes the transition of the wearer through the visual and tactile experience of self-fashioning. The “seamless” garment appears to claim that, in contrast to Enlightenment formal, immaterial subjectivity, it is the *surface* that regenerates the self, the other, and their link via the identification and displacement experienced. In the aforementioned shamanic performances, the unattainable beyond, or authenticity, is generated through the skillful manipulation of bodily surface, the fluid corporeal movement, and the strangeness of materiality, thus transforming the purifying *distinction* between faith and skepticism, between trick and techniques, into an “embarrassing” *mediation* (Pels, 2003, p. 38).

The knowledge that a maker can make via the experience of *being* the objects, via the experience of being taken apart and newly assembled during each making, reveals the previously



Figure 10 Dress Two with hand-woven seams. Side view.

imperceptible gap in the scientific methods used in studying human making. For me as a maker-researcher, the certainty of scientific research methods appear very strange indeed. Taussig says that anthropological fieldwork is “essentially based on personal experience and on storytelling and not on the model of laboratory protocols” (Taussig, 2011, p.48). Makers experience the humanness of human endeavor, the corporality of making, our forgetfulness, and the irrational desires and fears emerging in the process.

The anthropological analysis of magic and ritual emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century against a backdrop of evolutionist confidence, high imperialism, and high bourgeois anxiety. It thus concerned the discursive boundary between the ideal, modern subject that makes true perceptions and practices a rational discipline, and a magical subject that is set up in contrast as primitive and retrogressive (Pels, 2003, p.31). This attitude of early anthropology is evident in Frazer’s remarks in *The Golden Bough*, written in 1906:

[T]he primitive magician knows magic only on its practical side; he never analyses the mental processes on which his practice is based, never reflects on the abstract principles involved in his actions. With him, [...] logic is implicit, not explicit [...] to him magic is always an art, never a science; the very idea of science is lacking in his undeveloped mind. It is for the philosophic student to trace the train of thought, which underlies the magician’s practice; to draw out the few simple threads, of which the tangled skein is composed; to disengage the abstract principles from their concrete applications; in short, to discern the spurious science behind the bastard art (Frazer, 1920, p.53).

The anthropology of today, as it is evident in the works of Ingold, Taussig, and many others, acknowledges the non-rational forms of knowledge as a valuable counterpart of rational scientific knowledge. To my mind, it is the magician who needs to analyze his/her own practice, as he/she is likely to experience that art does not become science as it is analyzed, nor does it become explicit. Making is a humbling experience, through which makers learn that “they don’t know,” a knowledge that is constantly recalled by the contingency brought on by material agency. It is the *doubt* of certainty in the maker, or knowing the ways of not-knowing, that continuously evokes the *belief* in the unknown, driving the iterative process of making things and making meaning, working the mysterious gap between self and other.

The ambiguity of seamlessness

For me as the maker, the act of hand-seaming, together with its articulation in textual form, transforms the industrially woven fabric into a “defamiliarizing device,” if I borrow the Russian Formalist literary notion (Shklovsky, 2009). The seaming method is a device to delay the easy and safe arrival at settled meanings, to allow multiple possibilities of interpretation. The fact that making can be a defamiliarizing, contemplative, and sensuous process is not always apparent in conventional ways of making. My making as an estranging experience is pronounced by the simplicity of the patterns, which is a result of technical restrictions: in order to create a semblance of seamlessness by minimizing the scar-like “threshold,” I only employ seams that are along with lengthwise grain (along the vertical warp), crosswise grain (along the horizontal weft), and true bias grain (an angle of 45°). If sewn by machine, this type of design minimizes production time and cost, maximizing its reproducibility as a result. Yet these garments refuse this simple closure by complicating the very assembly of these most straightforward shapes.



Figure 11 Flared Skirt with hand-woven seams. Hand-woven hem detail.

Each garment is the product of a detour, a structure of purposeful delay. By suspending certainty this way, the various dichotomies of intellect/intuition, surface/depth, functionality/dysfunctionality, self/other are continuously deferred. This act of seaming, and the seam itself, embodies the process of reflective practice.

Throughout the making, the cut pieces of cloth being seamed and my work journal are constantly “in touch.” The sustained tactile and emotional interaction means that the seams and my journals are all me and my body. This becoming is mutual: each seaming stitch brings me closer to the object, until finally I am, as it were, inside it—the seam I have made “marks the edge of what I have become” (Berger quoted in Taussig, 2011, p.22). The maker becomes the garment he/she makes, or the journal he/she keeps. My “seamless” garments and the texts composed from the journal entries reveal the cut, gap, or failure I experienced during the process, as well as how the maker created a peculiar knowledge from these failures. Effectively revealed, therefore, in the ambiguity of seamlessness is the tension between credulity and skepticism inherent in any knowledge-making, and that our knowledge is forever imperfect, forever a process, never an end goal.

Notes

1. Christopher Frayling’s the much-quoted categorisation of practice-led research helps us understand what he calls the ‘Radical Academy’ (2008): ‘Research into, through, for the arts.’ In the 1993 article where this originates, he elaborates the three approaches through a quote from E.M. Forster: ‘The novelist E.M. Foster’s aunt once said to Forster: *‘How can I tell that I think till I see what I say?’* That seems to me to be very like the first category. If we modify this to *‘How can I tell what I think till I see what I make and do?’*, then we’ve covered the second category as well. But if we modify it further to *‘How can I tell what I am till I see what I make and do?’* it seems to me we have a fascinating dilemma on our hands. As much about autobiography and personal development as communicable knowledge.’ (Frayling, 1993, p.5)

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