

Locating a Space of Exchange:

re-imagining the liminal in contemporary painting practice



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Abstract

This thesis defines and locates a 'space of exchange' within the painting process and articulates the ways that this phenomenon plays a pivotal role in the often-backgrounded transformation of both process and painter.

I present a re-imagining of the concepts of liminality and alchemy in relation to the painting process, as underpinned by the interfaces existing and emerging between painting/painter/Painting (as process/subject/object). Through experimentation, intervention, collaboration, and performative iterations these concepts are shaped into a matrix that operates as a form of meaning-making in the enactment and encounter of painting.

The concept of liminality has been readily absorbed into numerous discourses across the arts – but notably, and most importantly, not in relation to the *process* of painting. This thesis examines how the painter can exploit the potentiality of this transformative space to develop experimental practice and push forward current thinking. It reframes the liminal as a conceptual space existing between painter and painting, process and outcome. This thesis also considers how the structured paradigm and language of alchemy might be appropriated to further articulate the transubstantive happenings occurring within the painting process. I extend the concepts of Presencing (Heidegger) and Becoming (Deleuze) to articulate the seemingly invisible pathways bound up in the painting process that lead painter and painting to a point of *being*, a metaphysical plane where painting *becomes*.

A new lexicon of hybrid terms is proposed that I argue is necessary to reflect the continuing evolution of painting and painter, contributing to an expanded painterly language with which to better understand the relational integrity between practice, materiality, process, and outcome. By definition, the liminal is a transitional between-space that resists the grasp of language seeking to pin down such slippery movements and ephemeral materialities, thus necessitating this rethinking of terms applied. This thesis also contributes to expanding discourse on practice-led research whereby I offer the blueprint of a Liminal Methodology; an elastic and evolvable methodology that can better navigate the 'between' spaces of research, the slippery areas that are difficult to grasp, to better enable realisation of the vast potentials that reside therein.

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I would like to thank my daughters, Lucy and Kitty, for their love and support, despite neither having any comprehension of what it is I ‘do’ all day, or what it’s ‘for’. Lastly, and most importantly, the biggest thank you of all is lovingly bestowed on my ever-patient husband, Steve. This has not been an easy journey, but you have been selflessly supportive and encouraging, generous and kind. Thank you for putting up with me through thick and thin.

This thesis is dedicated to my late parents, Richard and Sandy.

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Prologue

It is important to acknowledge that this thesis was written during the Covid 19 Pandemic of 2020/21, a global event that will undoubtedly have had a very profound and lasting effect on every single one of us.

The bones of my initial draft were completed during the first 'lockdown'; a time that I found very difficult and distressing. I found it challenging to keep to a 'normal' routine; it was hard to concentrate, difficult to sleep, and impossible to paint. I, like countless others, felt vulnerable, frightened, lonely, confused, sad, bereaved, and angry.

There were many, many points where I questioned the relevance of my research in a post-pandemic world.

We have all had to learn new ways of communicating, doing and being. I too, albeit slowly, have developed new ways of working - taking a gentler approach, and allowing this thesis to become instead a reflective piece of writing. It seemed appropriate to look inwards, to listen to the quietness of the inner dialogue, and not to the demons on my shoulder.

I could never have imagined writing my thesis in these uncertain times, and it seemed right to accept that it was going to turn out differently.

I remain grateful for the small things.

Introduction - Laying the Table¹

“Soup is to the meal what the welcoming smile of the hostess is to the party – a prelude of goodness to come.”

Louis Pullig de Gouy, *The Soup Book* (1949)

¹ The title of this introduction is taken from the advice on writing given to me by an eminent Professor at the start of my MA. ‘Sarah, don’t spend so long laying the table that you don’t have time to eat.’ She always called me Sarah. My name has, to my knowledge, always been Sally. (Tutorial conversation, Birmingham School of Art, December 2014)

Beginnings

I am a painter. It is the material nature of paint and its associated unguents that draw me in - the viscosity, the thickness, the smell, the stickiness, the sensuousness, the mess. Painting is a conversation I have with myself, seeking to find answers through the very act of painting itself. For me, the most interesting thing about painting is *not* actually 'The Painting'; it is what happens to the painter as she paints. The paint as material, and the painter as subject, in turn are transformed by the process. As the painter immerses and releases herself to this accretive process, I am interested in the ways she seeks to harness the transubstantive moment when painting *becomes* Painting, where activity translates to object.

I am a painter. My own painting practice acknowledges the traditions and past histories of painting, but it is not bound by a formal approach. I use painting as a language to express the things I cannot speak of. Until the outset of my PhD journey, my focus was on the female form and the destabilising of the figurative, creating an unsettling oscillation between the beauty of the subject and the complete annihilation of it (figures 1 & 2). My paintings depicted slippages, crevices, creases and orifices – sensuous places on the body where inside becomes outside. They encompass bodily fragments distorted by the dragging of the wet paint across the surface until the viewer is no longer sure of what we see.

I am a painter. Within my more recent 'work' – for I continue to paint but find myself now working in an increasingly exploratory and experimental way as my painting practice has been repositioned *as* my research - I have become increasingly intrigued by the notion of a liminal space and the 'between'. The female form continues to *inform* my painting but is no longer foregrounded *as* its form. From the hidden time between the pain of the injury and the "presentation of the bruise",² to the blackness of the penumbral shadows, and the transformative moment between life and death, there are suspended moments between past and present, self and other, being and not being within my work. My paintings are created and exist within this liminal place.

² Mavor, C. (2012) Black and Blue: The Bruising Passion of 'Camera Lucida', 'La Jetee', 'Sans Soleil' and 'Hiroshima Mon Amour'. USA: Duke University Press, p16.



Figure 1 Sally Bailey, *From A Safe Place*, 2014. Oil on panel, 170cm x 110cm.



Figure 2 Sally Bailey, *A Silent Voyage (detail)*, 2014. Oil on panel.

Positioning

Part of the opening title of this research thesis, *A Space of Exchange*, is a term borrowed from the writings of Brendan Prendeville.³ As I am appropriating it for my own use, it is necessary to clearly acknowledge and articulate the origins of the term and to explore how this differentiates from my own interpretation and application of it. The phrase first appeared in a journal article closely examining the writing and philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding the interplay between painting, perception, space and 'sens'⁴ (translated as a word that plays across the nuanced connotations of sensing, sensation, interpretation, direction and meaning). Merleau-Ponty discusses the pursuit of 'sens' as being the *essence* of the painter's vocation, a space where the painter's vision enters the realm of the visible, of *being*. Prendeville writes:

For Merleau-Ponty the discernment of sense, sens, makes the world possible. The 'world' in question here is not the physical world as such, but is rather a function of meaning, of our making sense of things; it is perspectival.⁵

Thus, Merleau-Ponty explores painting not in the representational terms of the physical world as we understand it. Rather it could be argued to refer to the inner world of painting; a place of contemplative thought processes that are then able to translate to transformative actions and being *of* painting.

Prendeville identifies and considers two distinct 'spaces' within Merleau-Ponty's reflections on painting and perception: the first being the psychophysical space inhabited by the painter (the realm of 'sens'), and the second he defines as the 'space of exchange'.⁶ This second space is a very different system of exchange, it is a transactional space that is defined by conventions of professional practice and the necessities of commercial negotiation. Prendeville focuses on the intersecting of these two spaces - the *chiasm*⁷ – where new openings await to be forged, and the potential for new exchanges revealed.

My own use of this term extends Prendeville's original concept and differs in several respects, most notably in the absence of any commercial connotation. Of course, an exchange is something that has many and varied applications. Besides inferring a monetary exchange, it can also be an exchange of

³ Prendeville, B. (1999) Merleau-Ponty, Realism and Painting: psychophysical space and the space of exchange. In *Art History*, Volume 22, pp.364-387.

⁴ Ibid, p364

⁵ Ibid, p372.

⁶ Ibid, p381.

⁷ Ibid, p376.

knowledge, of views, of kindness, of support, of gifts. However, all share the common theme of reciprocity; that which is exchanged is almost exclusively of equal value or agreed to be mutually beneficial to the parties involved. The 'space of exchange' that I want to define is the psychophysical and temporal space inhabited by the painter: a place of creativity, of sharing, of collaboration, and experimentation.

Within the painting process, I suggest that this 'space of exchange' is the liminal: a slippery yet generative place of potential, and of the transformation of both painter and process. The concept of liminality has been readily absorbed into numerous discourses across the arts – but notably, and most importantly, not in relation to painting process. Within extant literature it is posited as a transitional space, a threshold between two fixed entities, opposing spaces or states of being. The liminal space is characterised by a blurring, an ambiguity, a slipperiness; it poses a discontinuity and facilitates a place for 'newness'⁸ to come into being. It is not a physical space as such, but one located in the slippages and interstices between thinking and making. I argue that this 'space of exchange' is where the subconscious surfaces, and the invisible becomes (in)visible – where practice and process result in painting-as-object.

Here I draw on Derrida's theory of the 'undecidable'⁹ to articulate this precarious between-space. Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction subverts the logic of binary thinking arguing that such a logic creates rigid dichotomies that allow no room for the 'undecidable' – those things, positions and possibilities that cannot conform to either side of a dualistic state. I argue that the liminal space, that which I am envisaging as the 'space of exchange' within the painting process, can be positioned as an undecidable – as illustrated in the painting-diagram¹⁰ below (figure 3). It is neither process nor object but is traversed as part of the journey between; it exists where the opposite states of invisible and visible oscillate, and hovers as the (in)visible wherein the transformative potentials exist.

⁸ Bhabha, H. K. (2014) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, p212.

⁹ Derrida, J. (1981) *Positions*. Trans. Alan Bass. London: Athlone Press, p43.

¹⁰ A digitally generated diagram to articulate the spheres of my research seemed at odds with the very bones of this thesis – the painting process. Since my thinking evolves through my practice, it seemed appropriate that the required diagram would emerge from that same place. I have named this a Painting-Diagram to reflect that decision.



Figure 3 Sally Bailey, *(In)Visible. Painting-diagram*, 2021.

This 'space of exchange' is an emergent and subversive space that provides room for 'stuff' (material, performative and otherwise) to happen, but it is also a space that resists all attempts to measure and quantify its existence, and this is inevitably problematic in the context of articulating and demonstrating methodological rigour, and this conundrum will need to be considered carefully.

In this thesis, I chart the beginnings of a journey to understanding the importance of the material processes within the making and being of painting; since the non-captured liminal is usually removed from the encountering of painting (in a gallery or museum setting, for example) I am seeking ways to include the (in)visible in that discourse. I put forward that it is here that knowledge emerges; where the painter acquiesces to the potentialities within the process, and painting *becomes* Painting. It is here that a transubstantive 'moment' occurs - this moment, this 'intensity'¹¹ is something that cannot be presumed nor predicted, and yet, as this thesis examines, this 'intensity' could indeed be the very force that draws painters to painting.

alchemy

This research does not draw on alchemy as a mediaeval precursor to modern chemistry, but instead reaches to the *language* of alchemy to articulate the transformative, transubstantive happenings located within this messy and unpredictable process.

Many authors have tackled the relationship between painting and alchemy - however this literature is largely based around the use of alchemical symbolism within painting (as with the Surrealist movement), or the alchemical processes harnessed by the Old Masters to produce the purest pigments for oil painting (James Elkins). My own theory of the relationship between painting and

¹¹ Lyotard, J-F. (1993) *Libidinal Economies*. Trans. Iain Hamilton-Grant. London: Athlone Press.

alchemy examines the extent to which the *process* of painting itself can be considered an alchemical process (figures 4 & 6); an area that has not previously been researched.¹²

The writings of James Elkins have been key to my initial enquiry. In his opening analogy Elkins states,

Alchemy is the best and most eloquent way to understand how paint can mean; how it can be so entrancing, so utterly addictive, so replete with expressive force, that it can keep hold of an artist's attention for an entire lifetime.¹³

This research project intends to build on Elkins' original ideas, and will begin by examining the extent to which this vibrant alchemical language can be used to explore the transubstantive processes that occur within the act of painting, and how a liminal space that facilitates this 'happening' can be defined.

context

It is important at this juncture to clearly define the positioning of 'contemporary' in the context of my research title. The consensus within the Art World is that 'contemporary' relates to artworks produced from the 1960's/70's to the present day;¹⁴ it is understood that contemporary art embodies *now-ness*; embracing innovation and employing a dynamic approach to concepts and materials, processes and outcomes. It remains however, a very wide tranche of time to explore, and hence my primary research focus is on paintings produced since the start of the new Millennium.

On painting *beyond* Painting,¹⁵ a term applied to painting that eschews conventional techniques and seeks a more experimental approach,¹⁶ Achim Hochdorfer, Director of the Brandhurst Museum in Munich, writes,

The essence of painting is no longer defined by the manual application of paint onto a canvas or some other support; rather it manifests itself in the fact that paintings are no longer understood as self-contained, hermetically sealed objects, but are instead hubs of much larger referential networks.¹⁷

Across this thesis I consider the painting process from several standpoints. Firstly, and from within the painting process, I consider how the painter might locate, inhabit and exploit the liminal, to investigate the operational forces residing within this space and postulate on how these phenomena might play

¹² Some authors have used the term 'alchemy' to describe what is essentially experimentation within the making process – this is not the same as the transubstantive processes that I seek to name here.

¹³ Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*. London: Routledge, p7.

¹⁴ <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/c/contemporary-art> [accessed 12 November 2019].

¹⁵ <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-modern/display/beyond-painting> [accessed 12 November 2019]

¹⁶ This term was first used to describe the painting techniques of cubism, dadaism and constructivism.

¹⁷ Ammer, M. & Hochdorfer, A. (2016) *Painting 2.0: Expression in the Information Age*, Munich: Del Monico Books, p.25

a pivotal role in the transformation of both process (to object) and of painter. The voices of co-painters are also examined here; a number of conversations discussing my theories have been recorded and transcribed over the course of this research, now existing as dialogue-paintings¹⁸ to be presented in an exposition of process that exists as an integral part of this thesis. These dialogue-paintings serve as a backdrop to inform my thinking, and in turn are an (in)visible presence throughout my writing.



Figure 4 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Copper 2)* 2019. Oils, patination fluid on copper panel, 18cm x 13cm.

¹⁸ These dialogue-paintings were recorded during collaborative residencies, and later transcribed, they serve as archival documentation of community thinking and making, and the sharing of opinion and knowledge. These anonymised conversations underline the importance of collaborative working in bringing a collective voice to the fore that transcends a singular knowledge.

Pathways Emerging

Painting is the ever-present backdrop to this thesis. As an artist-researcher, I am beguiled by the mystery of the process, seduced by the perfume and sensuous feel of the materials, and mesmerised by the promise of the possible. For the painter, this process can never truly be harnessed, and they live with the knowledge that failures will be many. And yet the painter continues to paint, and to search out new avenues that might lead to the answers they seek.

questioning

These are my research questions; within and between these questions lie the paths that I travel. The answers that I uncover, as rooted in my practice, are ruminated upon, and discussed within the chapters that follow. It is here that I share my thoughts and my processes, with the aim that the reader can gain insights into the unpredictable journey of painting and painter.

1. To what extent can the liminal be understood as a 'space of exchange' within contemporary painting practice, and how can this space offer new ways of conceptualising the enactment and encounter of contemporary painting?
2. In what ways can the transformative potential of the painting process be exploited by the painter to harness the (as-yet-undefined) forces within that process, normally concealed in the painted object?
3. How might the concept and language of alchemy and its processes be appropriated to reveal and further articulate the transubstantive happenings contained within the painting process?

Thresholds of Becoming

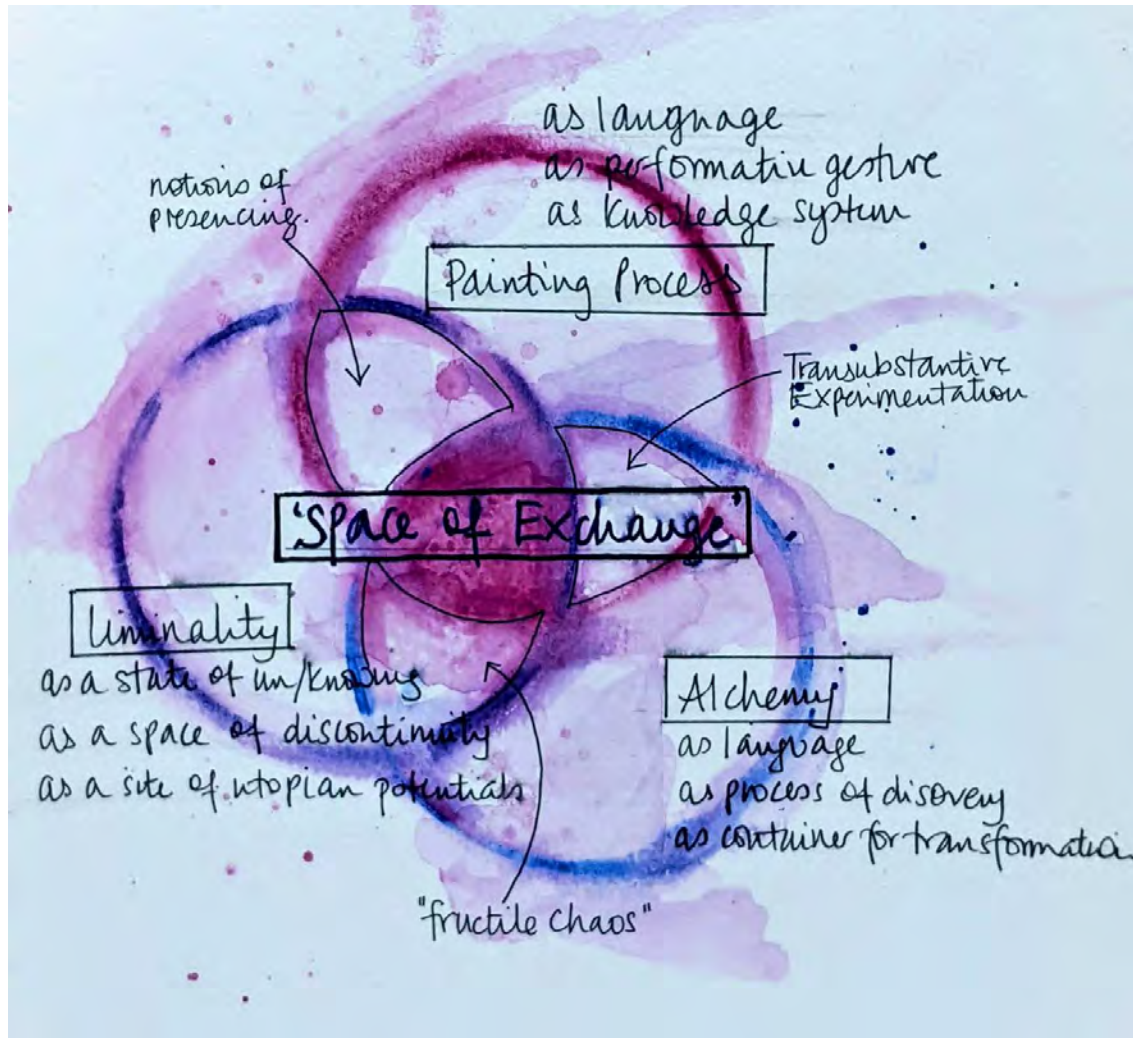


Figure 5 Sally Bailey, *Spheres of Engagement*. painting-diagram, 2021.

This painting-diagram illustrates the three central spheres of engagement explored within this thesis and demonstrates the interrelatedness of these seemingly disparate threads (figure 5). Very much like the 'space of exchange' that my research and practice explore, these three arenas revolve around each other, overlap, and collide; at points in time they merge, and a new opening then reveals itself. As I argue in this thesis, these multiple voices can be layered and woven to form a new painterly language with which to explore the relational integrity and alchemical bond between practice, materiality, process and outcome. These are not static, mapped places. They are instead fluid, nebulous, and fragile. This rigid – and yet simultaneously blurry - pictorial framework therefore is not

to be understood as wholly representative of my thinking, but it will serve to aid the reader to visualise how these pieces fit together and better understand what could emerge from that.

As the painting-diagram alludes to, there is not necessarily a linear reading of the text within this thesis (since it has neither been conceived nor crafted in that way), but instead it adopts more a layered approach. As such, I would encourage the reader to consider the fare at this table more as a tasting-menu of small morsels; each interesting in their own right, but not necessarily intended to be consumed all together in one sitting.

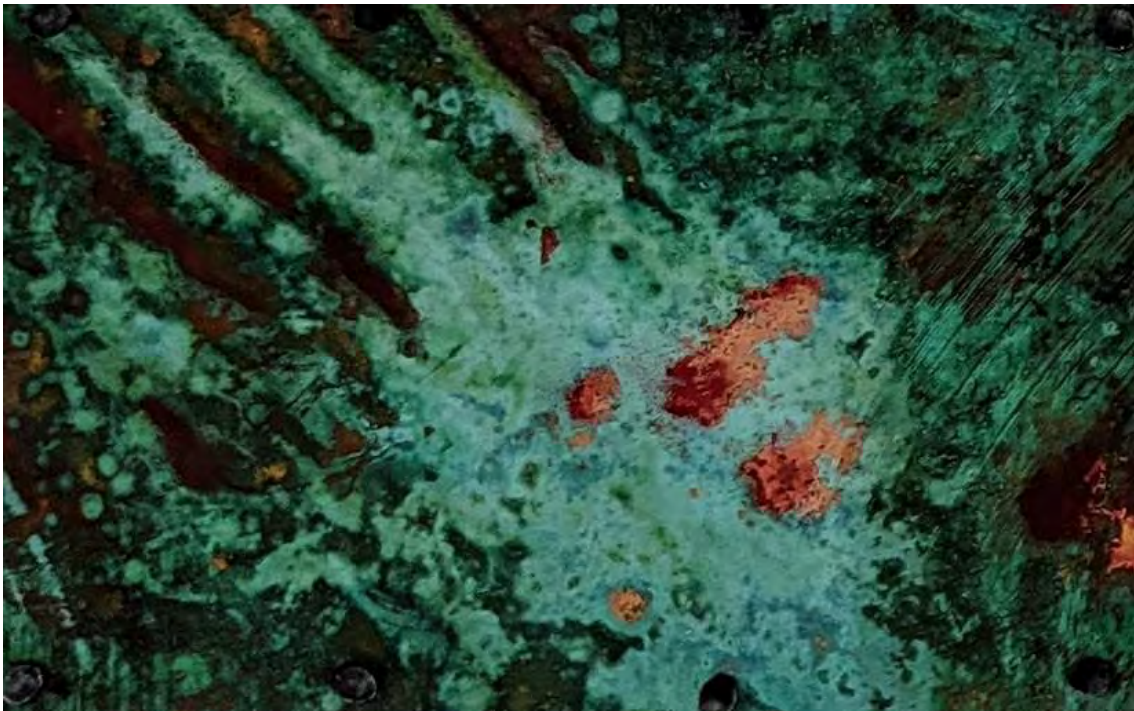


Figure 6 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Copper 2)* 2019. Oils, patination fluid on copper panel, 18cm x 13cm.

Considerings

liminality/alchemy

In Chapter One I examine the seminal cross-disciplinary writings of Van Gennep, Victor Turner and Homi Bhabha in their approaches to the liminal and consider this in relation to more contemporaneous texts from Susan Broadhurst, Timothy Carson and Agnes Horvath. As I begin to envisage the liminal as a conceptual place existing between painter and painting, process and outcome, I posit that there simultaneously exists a transubstantive point at which the two merge and then separate. It is here, at this juncture, that the ancient art of alchemy becomes a part of this expanding bricolage.

process/painting

Chapter Two considers this research in relation to what contemporary painting is, what it isn't, and what it could be. Contemporary painting has 'long since left its ancestral home'¹⁹ – commonly understood as a rectangular stretched canvas on wood support, ornately framed and hung with reverence – and now resides in far more diverse (and arguably far more accessible) accommodation. Since the 1960s, traditional conventions of what painting *is* (in terms of materials, composition, techniques, and dimension) have systematically been taken apart. The dynamic optimism and energy of the 1960's was reflected in the numerous new approaches that painters were embracing at that time, from Dadaism and Abstract Expressionism, to Conceptual and Performance art. As Matt Saunders, painter and photographer, remarked, "paint doesn't always make a painting and for a painting one doesn't always need paint."²⁰ Painting can no longer be considered medium-specific²¹ since the traditional craft of the painter has latterly become associated with an ever-expanding range of art practices, methods, and meanings. As Andre Rottmann, art historian and critic writes:

There is no painting as such: it could be concluded that painting is moving beyond the limitations of its once-traditional material support, without abolishing its ancestral discursive and institutional scaffolding altogether. The paradigms that once provided the very basis of painterly articulations have not been annihilated, but are disseminated across an expanded array of practices, materials, media, and sites.²²

¹⁹ Harland, B. & Manghani, S. (2016) *Painting: Critical & Primary Sources, Vol 4: Process & Strategies*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p3.

²⁰ Graw, I. & Lajer-Burcharth, E. (2016) *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p183.

²¹ Ibid, p6

²² Graw, I. Birnbaum, D. & Hirsch, N. (2014) *Thinking Through Painting; Reflexivity and Agency Beyond the Canvas*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p10.

By considering carefully what contemporary painting is, isn't and could be, in the context of this expanded and expansive medium, this thesis will articulate ways through which painting can remain relevant in this metamodern world.

method/experimentation

In Chapter Three, I examine artistic research in the context of 'research at the edge of chaos',²³ and present my argument for a new liminal methodology. I consider the painting *process* as a methodology in (and of) itself and explore how that process might operate as a liminal space.

Utilising this liminal methodology, Chapter Four explores sites of experimentation that focus specifically on the primacy of making-spaces occupied by the painter, which I (re)position as the 'studio-as-laboratory',²⁴ and the 'exhibition/exposition'.²⁵ The functions of these reimagined spaces are many and varied, but most importantly are constantly flexing and evolving to meet the fluid requirements of the contemporary painter. Here I contend that the studio is not defined simply as a place of work, a place where paintings are painted, and paintings are stored. I propose the notion of the studio also existing as a liminal space – no longer necessarily a physical place, but a shape-shifting space somewhere *between* making, thinking, experimenting, and being. Within these porous parameters of the studio-as-laboratory, the painter-as-chemist practices her craft.

Chapter Five examines the position of the painter who chooses to embrace collaborative working practices and considers the conversations that are borne from such activity as transubstantive and alchemic spaces of exchange. Painting and collaboration are not often considered comfortable bedfellows, since painting is traditionally considered a largely solitary pursuit – but here I offer a re/definition of collaboration as evidenced in my own practice as research. I put forward that collaborative involvements, far from being paradoxically situated, operate as just one singular strand of a multi-stranded, multi-dimensional contemporary painting practice – and a strand that can weave itself seamlessly into new ways of working, making and thinking. Embracing this approach, I argue, can bring a greater depth to our artistic vocabulary, and reveal outlets for this new voice. The chapter concludes with the documentation of a group residency I participated in with the aim of developing emergent ideas around creative processes as performative activity.

²³ Gray, C. & Pirie, I. 1995) *Artistic Research Procedure: Research at the Edge of Chaos*. London: University of Salford Press.

²⁴ These hybrid terms have evolved through the course of this research at points where the current lexicon of painterly language fell short of my requirements. Each term will be fully articulated at the relevant place within the thesis, and a lexicon of all new terms appears in the final chapter, *The Ambix*.

²⁵ See above.

Chapter Six approaches (with caution) the paradoxical relationships that exist within the painting process. The first paradox considered is that of 'locating' the liminal; for how can we find, define, and inhabit a place so amorphous and intangible in nature? The liminal is itself form/less; working through notions of space/place, temporality, and haptic visuality,²⁶ I explore strategies to unravel this dilemma. The second paradox under scrutiny is that of positioning painting as a *performative* process; I argue that a performative understanding of the painting process is productive in offering new ways to conceptualise the enactment and encounter of contemporary painting. The voices of Brad Haseman, Barbara Bolt and Amelia Jones all contribute to this discussion.

The conclusions drawn (and the conclusions still beyond reach) from these chapters are distilled in the final chapter, The Ambix, where the metaphorical table is cleared, and we reflect on the fare presented.

²⁶ Haptic visuality is a term created by Laura U. Marks; writing in relation to the cinematic, Marks argues that visuality must be understood as multi-sensory and include the tactile senses.

Structure

My writing-voice is multiple: it is one of contemplation, of narration, of storytelling and conversations (both real and imagined). What started as perhaps a very traditionally formatted thesis has therefore become something quite different: all the key ingredients are still here (in terms of methodology, literature review, case studies, analysis and reflection) but it is authentically interspersed with sections of writing that are much more personal to me and my practice, my methods and intentions, and the concepts explored therein. These sections could be read as art-writing,²⁷ as thinking-spaces, as voice-experiments. There is an initial need, therefore, to explain the shape of this submission to the reader, and to offer thoughts on how this could be encountered, navigated and assimilated.

The framework of this thesis is interspersed with writings that I have called Interludes and **Becomings**. The Interludes are short sections of writing taken from my reflective journals, and perform as art-writing, as written silent conversations with myself, or as small works of fiction. The inclusion of these interludes offers the reader a small glimpse of my inner thought processes, and hence articulate my making processes encapsulated within the 'space of exchange'.

During my research I undertook what might be conventionally described as 'projects' as a way of exploring my practice through experimental process. These projects were documented and analysed, and four of them appear at pertinent points throughout this thesis. Building on the work of Deleuze and Guattari,²⁸ and Elizabeth Grosz,²⁹ I have named these documents '**Becomings**' - they are the recording and exposure of my own research *as it happens through my practice*. These moments of 'becoming' act as signposts throughout the text and should be understood as such, bringing the reader closer to my process and practice. Some are process-driven, others are method-driven – and all are pivotal to my research, practice, process, and their intertwining, in positioning my practice *as* research. These writings are identified within the text by title, **colour** and format to denote that they are simultaneously integrated and yet separate to the thesis, occupying a transitional between space. I consider these events to be the key component of this submission; they relate firmly to my process, my research and the wider contribution that I endeavour to demonstrate.

The **Becomings** are not merely illustrative interludes, but perhaps provide the very framework itself, and I consider that my Painting-Diagrams, introduced earlier in this chapter, operate on the same

²⁷ Many have written on the subject of art-writing (McLeod, Lomax, et al), and the different facets of this genre will be examined in Chapter Three. My own use of the term denotes that the writing is inextricably bound up in my painting practice and emerges from it – they are writing-paintings perhaps.

²⁸ Deleuze, G & Guattari (2012) *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.

²⁹ Grosz, E. ed. (1999) *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*. London: Cornell University Press.

level. My aim is that the reader will immerse themselves in the experiencing of my process (both artistic and academic) and come to better understand the imbricated nature of this journey.



Figure 7 Sally Bailey, fragment i.³⁰

Images of my own work are interspersed throughout this text; this thesis examines the process of painting from within, and therefore necessitates a sharing of my own making-thinking processes. These images serve a number of functions – as archival documentation, as re/presentation of process as object, as illustrations within storytelling, and as an/other voice within this conversation. They are as critical as the written words and should be considered as such; immersive visual notations communicating the embodied experience of the painter. The images of my own work (messy, unfinished, fragmentary and somewhere between) are juxtaposed with images from other artists – shown from a different perspective, as resolved, whole, completed paintings; the varnished surfaces give no clues as to the palimpsestuous nature of their creation, nor the oft-anguished toil of the painter.....

³⁰ Throughout this thesis, small fragments of my thinking as expressed through my painting process are included. These fragments are to be read as punctuation marks within the text that elucidate my argument.

Outcomes

Some of the conundrums I conjure with cannot yet be fully unravelled and explicated, for not everything within, or outside, our understanding *can* be defined, explained, or measured (indeed as I argue this is precisely the generativity of the liminal). We must be patiently receptive to the notion that these diversions could also present new possibilities, and that when following a pathway, we do not *always* need to know where we are going.

As Graeme Sullivan wrote so succinctly:

If a measure of the value of research is to be seen as the capacity to create new knowledge and understanding that is individually and culturally transformative, then criteria need to move beyond probability and plausibility to possibility.³¹

Building on this 'liminal' contextual framework, the tangible outcomes of this research will be threefold, and it is here I put forward my contributions to knowledge.

Firstly, a new lexicon of hybrid terms is developed; necessary to reflect the continuing evolution of painting and painter, it contributes to an expanded painterly language with which to better understand the relationship between painter, practice, materiality, and process. I claim these new terms as my own; they are presented throughout and also together as a lexicon in the final chapter, 'The Ambix'.

Secondly, I offer the blueprint of a Liminal Methodology – sitting between and beyond existing methodologies it is interdisciplinary, transitional, transformative and porous; a methodology that can better navigate the between spaces of research, the slippery areas that are difficult to grasp, and realise the vast potentials that reside therein.

Finally, as the title of this thesis proposed, I present my (re)imagining of the liminal in contemporary painting process, as a 'Space of Exchange': no longer to be considered as simply a waiting space, or a threshold to be transgressed through process, the 'space of exchange' is positioned as a fertile, generative space of yet-to-be-known possibilities.

³¹ Sullivan, G. (2010) *Art Practice As Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*. London: Sage Publications, p96.

And so, I refer back to the title of this thesis, 'A Space of Exchange'. This is my ultimate intention: that in the context of these contributions, the reader will encounter this text, engage with the concepts explored within, responses will be formed, and a process of exchange will be initiated.

Interlude

I have made some strange small painting-drawings today incorporating typed-text found phrases. Illustrative rather than painterly, they are disquieting and disrupting.

I wanted to paint something pretty, something that I could gift to a friend. But I don't think she would like these offerings, let alone thank me for them. Obviously, I love them. I have birthed them and will care for them as long as they need me to. My love for them is the measure of disdain others will inwardly feel.

Being a Painter, I have concluded, is hard work. Ridiculed and poor, I will forever be surrounded by my unloved children.

(Excerpt from Reflective Journal, December 2018)

Chapter One - Notions of the In-Between

“I am constantly trying to communicate something incommunicable, to explain something inexplicable, to tell about something I only feel in my bones, and which can only be experienced in these bones.”

Franz Kafka, *Letters to Milena* (1952)

Scene Setting

The main purpose of this chapter is to set the scene: to examine notions of the in-between, to critically engage with extant literature in the field, and articulate my own hypotheses around the themes of liminality and alchemy that are so central to this thesis. This 'literature review' does not sit neatly in one single chapter, but instead is embedded throughout the thesis. The reasoning behind this is to better present an integrated picture of process, practice, and theory. For me as an artist-researcher there is simply no delineation between these three strands, and to pull them apart purposefully would be an anathema. So instead, I begin to set the scene here, and the rest of the story will unfold as we journey together.

This chapter deals with two very slippery concepts: liminality and alchemy - notions not usually considered together. However, this thesis draws on both notions to explore the process of painting; it requires the painter to access an 'inner space' of painting, to experience that which I propose is a 'space of exchange', and to discover the transubstantive possibilities within where the painting *becomes*. However, the liminal spaces within process – where the painter and painting both face the potentials for transformation – offer no certainty of outcome. As this chapter starts to unfold, it becomes clear that locating and embracing the liminal cannot alone bring about change; it is merely the space that allows change to happen if other forces are harnessed within. I therefore propose that alchemical forces are part of this transformative possibility, and that the alchemical and the liminal – although strange bedfellows – can indeed work together to make magic.

Un/defining Liminality

roots

The liminal has been widely used in discourse over the past forty years. Waning in and out of favour over that time, it is currently enjoying a marked resurgence in interest and application across several disciplines. The generally understood definition has its origins in the work of Arnold van Gennep.³² Introducing the concept of liminality in relation to rites of passage, Gennep interpreted this very much as a negative space in terms of activity and energy, but nonetheless a necessary transition point in human development. It is positioned entirely as a constructed 'waiting' space, experienced as an absolute suspension of time and activity. This is in direct contrast to the later work of Victor Turner³³ who also discussed the 'betwixt and between'³⁴ in relation to rites of passage, rituals, and symbols, but with a very different emphasis and energy in the interpretation. Importantly he posits this 'betwixt and between' as an inherently positive space, a site of 'becoming', eloquently offered by Turner as a place where "the past is momentarily negated, suspended, and the future has not yet begun, an instant of pure potentiality when everything, as it were, trembles in the balance",³⁵ suggesting that the liminal functions as a site where the raw potentials for meaning, knowledge and being are generated; it is precarious ground indeed. Turner wrote powerfully on the transformative potential of the liminal space facilitating these rites of passage, elaborating thus:

Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storeroom of possibilities; not by any means a random assemblage, but a striving after new forms and structure, a gestation process, a fetation of modes appropriate to anticipating post-liminal existence.³⁶

'Fructile' and 'fetation' both references to the processes of conception, pregnancy and birth, are beautifully utilised here to elaborate on the rite of passage understood as a ritual re-birth, as a *becoming* (of *being*) again. This notion of becoming represents a conceptual crescendo of my work – I envisage that the painter and the work of the painter indeed experience something equivalent to this ritual 'rebirth'³⁷ as Turner himself imagined it; that the painter, through her process, faces the

³² Arnold van Gennep (1873-1957), Dutch ethnographer, renowned for his studies of rites of passage. His most famous work detailed his findings, *Les Rites de Passage*, first published in 1909.

³³ Victor Turner (1920-1983), British anthropologist. Here I specifically reference his most renowned work, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*, published in 1969, which made the connection between rites of passage, a liminal state of between, and structured ritual.

³⁴ Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*. London: Routledge, p.11.

³⁵ Turner, V. (1982) *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*. New York: PAJ Publications, p.44

³⁶ Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*. London: Routledge, p.11

³⁷ Ibid, p159

potential of this marginalised liminal space. Within this space, painter and painting are one, until a transformative 'moment' occurs, and the painting comes into being. From this space, painter and painting emerge – changed and separated.

Most significant to my research has been the work of Homi Bhabha³⁸ in his seminal text, *The Location of Culture*.³⁹ Here he uses the concept of liminality - which he restages and renames 'The Third Space'⁴⁰ - to argue that cultural production happens fastest when there is 'ambivalence',⁴¹ arguing that when society is disillusioned with the choice between existing constructs, the liminal space of ambivalence between becomes then a construct in its own right. This interpretation is sympathetic to the work of Van Gennep, in that it implies a negative connotation to this space, but interestingly Bhabha suggests that this is how 'newness'⁴² enters the world - that this construct of the 'Third Space' is required to facilitate newness, and that newness cannot happen without it. In terms of my own research, I draw on these thoughts on what the liminal could offer, re-imagining it as an immersive and generative space, where the painters' vision is embodied through the bodily enactment of the painting process itself, leading to a point of 'becoming'.

Also important in my wrestling with questions of what the liminal is/is not/could be, are the writings of the metaphysical poet Andrew Marvell⁴³ (1621-1678). His poetry explores the ephemeral states of the 'between'; the importance of this text is that it is possibly one of the earliest interpretations of liminality, engaging the reader to 'inhabit' a space between innocence and experience, life and death. His use of the mirror metaphor is frequent throughout his work; Marvell juxtaposes the ability of the silvered surface to be simultaneously reflective *and* introspective, true and yet somehow distorted. This notion of the liminal as a space of multiple layers of possibility, at times challengingly paradoxical, is important in my own re-imagining. Marvell offers the vision of the metaphorical mirror as reflecting a 'truer' truth;⁴⁴ I envisage the painter engaged in the process of painting, being both reflective and introspective, again offering another space that allows for the *becoming* of both painter and painting.

My own repositioning of the liminal could be seen as a marriage of these three interpretations, a union from which a new, defined generative place of unknown potentiality is conceived.

³⁸ Homi Bhabha (b. 1949), Post-colonial theorist and writer, Bhabha tackles new notions of identity, social agency, and theories of cultural hybridity.

³⁹ Bhabha, H. (2004) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p55

⁴¹ Ibid, p121

⁴² Bhabha, H. (2004) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, p10.

⁴³ Faust, J. (2012) *Andrew Marvell's Liminal Lyrics: The Space Between*. USA: University of Delaware Press.

⁴⁴ Ibid. p27.

Liminality is a concept that traverses and emerges from multiple disciplines. The example of its usefulness in Cultural and Social studies is epitomised in the writings of Bhabha, as already mentioned. Contemporary theorists in this field utilising this concept of a 'between' space include Bjorn Thomasson and Agnes Horvath, both exploring new interpretations of the liminal, and repositioning it as a central concept in thinking, process, and production. This revival of the concept is not, however without its pitfalls. As Bjorn Thomasson writes, the liminal is such a slippery and amorphous entity, that it can be interpreted and applied in any number of ways, and can signify a baffling array of different things to different people:

Liminality explains nothing. Liminality is. It happens. It takes place. And human beings react to liminal experience in different ways. Those ways cannot be easily predicted.⁴⁵

Thomasson stresses the importance, therefore, of using the term reflexively 'with due stress on the concepts of experience and transition.'⁴⁶ I argue that this consideration resonates deeply with my own interpretation and application of the liminal in relation to painting process: that the painter must locate, inhabit and experience the liminal in order to uncover the potential for transformation – both of the painter and the painting. This notion of transformation as a *becoming* will be fully explored in Chapter Two.

In *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*,⁴⁷ Agnes Horvath suggests that liminality is perhaps best considered as a prism⁴⁸, a transparent object refracting our current understanding of the world, and separating out the structural threads of the lived experience, thus making liminality a unique tool in terms of information gathering and analysis. This is an important text in beginning to help untangle my own interpretation, and although written for the purposes of social and political sciences, and not artistic and creative processes, it is immensely useful in unravelling some of the complex conundrums this concept presents. In this research I utilise Horvath's prism, and the light reflecting and refracting through it, where the light signifies a period of inward travel, of reflection, and of evaluation. We emerge on the other side changed, and yet somehow still the same.

Horvath also questions whether the manipulation of affectivity is a key aspect of liminality. Indeed, can the liminal be purposefully created (as the liminal is regarded in the cultural phenomena of rites

⁴⁵ Thomasson, B. (2016) *Liminality and the Modern: Living Through the In-Between*. London: Routledge, p14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p7.

⁴⁷ Horvath, A. ed. (2018) *Breaking Boundaries: Varieties of Liminality*. New York: Berghan Books.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p1

of passage) or similarly manipulated by external influences, such as the painter, being both within the liminal space of the process, and as the creator of that experience? Horvarth continues to underline, that whilst the liminal has traditionally been characterised as “a place of play, fluidity, and imagination, it is also a place and means of connection.”⁴⁹ As I am considering this concept within the context of the painting process, I argue the importance also that this is not just regarded as a theory, but equally that the liminal is a method and space of praxis: that these fragile threads then become indexically interwoven into the fabric of the making, providing structure, shape and purpose to the theoretical.

In the field of Architecture, the prominent exponents of the liminal include Professor Philip Beesley.⁵⁰ Beesley led an ambitious collaborative architectural project which was erected as Canada’s entry into the 12th International Architecture exhibition at the 2010 Venice Biennale, and documented in the subsequent publication, *Hylozoic Ground: Liminal Responsive Architecture*.⁵¹

The project offered a pioneering vision of the liminal, since traditionally in architectural terms the liminal is a space that exists simply to facilitate transitional movement – such as a doorway, an atrium, a lobby. His architectural utilisation of the concept demanded a new imagining of domestic spaces: it combined artificial intelligence and interactive technologies to create an unprecedentedly intelligent ‘living’ environment (figure 7), one that could autonomously ‘care’ for the person within it by anticipating and responding to their needs as they inhabit the space. The huge mesh-like structure, formed from thousands of digitally fabricated pieces, was able to sense and respond to the movement of the viewer by changing the position of the affected elements within it.

For Beesley, the key features of architectural liminality demonstrated in this sculpture are those of transition and of movement, but also of autonomy and being.⁵² Critically, this innovative reinvention of the liminal space created can transform both the occupant *and* the way the occupant inhabits that space. For it is here the liminal moves beyond the solely conceptual, to manifest itself as a defined, physical (im/material) space, a position that resonates with my own thinking.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p.89

⁵⁰ Professor Philip Beesley is Professor of Architecture at Waterloo University, Canada. As a practitioner/researcher, his collaborative projects bring together science, technology, and art to imagine and define innovative modalities for residential living.

⁵¹ Beesley, P. (2010) *Hylozoic Ground: Liminal Responsive Architecture*. Toronto: Riverside Architectural Press.

⁵² The title of this revolutionary work, *Hylozoic Ground: Liminal Responsive Architecture*, draws on the early Greek philosophical concept of Hylozoism, a concept that considered all matter (including the inanimate) to be in some way ‘living’. This philosophy has been studied by many scholars since, and remains at the forefront of thinking today: in the field of architecture, a seminal work is that of Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order: An Essay on the Art of Building and the Nature of the Universe*, a four-volume publication produced 2002-2004.



Figure 8 Philip Beesley, *Hylozoic Ground* (installation view), 2010.

Within the arts, whilst the concept of the liminal is not often encountered, it is perhaps most prevalent within the realm of Performance Art. The work of Susan Broadhurst, writing on the liminal in theatre and dance, is important here; examining these performed actions within the 'space of exchange' informs my own thinking around the process of painting. (In Chapter Six - Paradoxical Relationships, I also unravel the possibilities of similarly considering painting as both performed and *performative*.) Broadhurst writes:

...traits that are central to the liminal are indeterminacy, fragmentation, a loss of the auratic and the collapse of the hierarchical distinction between high and mass/popular culture...there is a definite blurring of a set of boundaries; in other words a certain hybridisation is evident.⁵³

Broadhurst cites the work of Pina Bausch as being illustrative of this, where her work seamlessly combines dance and theatre (figure 8). Bausch, in conversation about her ballet productions states that "she is not interested in 'how' people move, what she wants to know is 'what' moves them and what goes on inside."⁵⁴ Further traits of the liminal are offered by Broadhurst: "self-consciousness and reflexivity, montage and collage, an exploration of the paradoxical, ambiguous open-ended nature of reality",⁵⁵ which can equally be considered in terms of the liminal in contemporary painting process.



Figure 9 Pina Bausch, *Tanztheater* (rehearsal).

⁵³ Susan Broadhurst, *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theatre*. (London: Cassell Publishing, 1999) p13

⁵⁴ Ibid, p70

⁵⁵ Ibid, p17

Although multifarious in nature, these many interpretations across several disciplines do have many fundamental commonalities. All utilise the basic nature of the liminal in providing an alternative or disruption to expected binaric divisions; it is always a space characterised by a blurring, an ambiguity, a slipperiness, posing a discontinuity and facilitating a place for 'newness'⁵⁶ to come into being. Very little, however, has been written about the concept of liminality in relation to painting (as practice) or the painting *process*.

In terms of relating concepts of the liminal to art *practice*, it has historically (pre-twentieth century) been approached in a very limited (and limiting) way, focusing on the liminal as a state of being that is largely disassociated with notions of the self, and of meaning-making. Notions of the uncanny, between-spaces, and representational interpretations of the liminal – these all have been discussed widely in relation to Painting (as object), but considering the painting process *itself* through the conceptual lens of the liminal has not.

This research redresses this by considering how the function and potentiality of the liminal, re-imagined as a 'space of exchange', in painting and process can affect how the 'work' of art and the 'work of art' is experienced and encountered. This shift from a deconceptualized, abstract *space*, to an embodied experience of *place* is perhaps key;⁵⁷ restaging the liminal in this way could allow an articulation of these abstracted flickering's of thought and will enable me to confidently position myself and my enquiry amidst this wider terrain. But this will not be a straightforward task; as the artist Tammy Renee Brackett writes, this is an elusive and unmapped territory where little makes 'sense':

This is not a physical location that is being mapped here. It is I. You are looking at me and trying to figure out where I am. I'm doing the same. However, I am content with not being located. While you may consider me lost, I am content with looking.⁵⁸

As Brackett acknowledges here, whilst this unmapped (and potentially unmappable) ground may be a space of uncertainty, it is not one to be feared; to 'lose' oneself in the process of painting can indeed trigger the opening up of transformative potentials.

⁵⁶ Bhabha's theories of how 'newness' enters our world are set out in a chapter of his aforementioned book, *The Location of Culture*, pages 212-235.

⁵⁷ The discourse surrounding space/place will be discussed in Chapter Six, Paradoxical Relationships (Locating the Liminal).

⁵⁸ Eaton, E. & Smelt, T. eds. (2007) *Spaces-In-Between: Visible and Invisible*. New York: Evolutionary Girls, p1.

This research presents a vision of the liminal as being ephemeral and ambiguous, and simultaneously transitional and between; these are recognised qualities of liminality. Crucially however, I argue that aside from these qualities, the liminal is also a *state*, and a *space*, and that these are bound together by *be(com)ing*; a quality of liminality that has not yet been articulated in literature⁵⁹(figure 9)

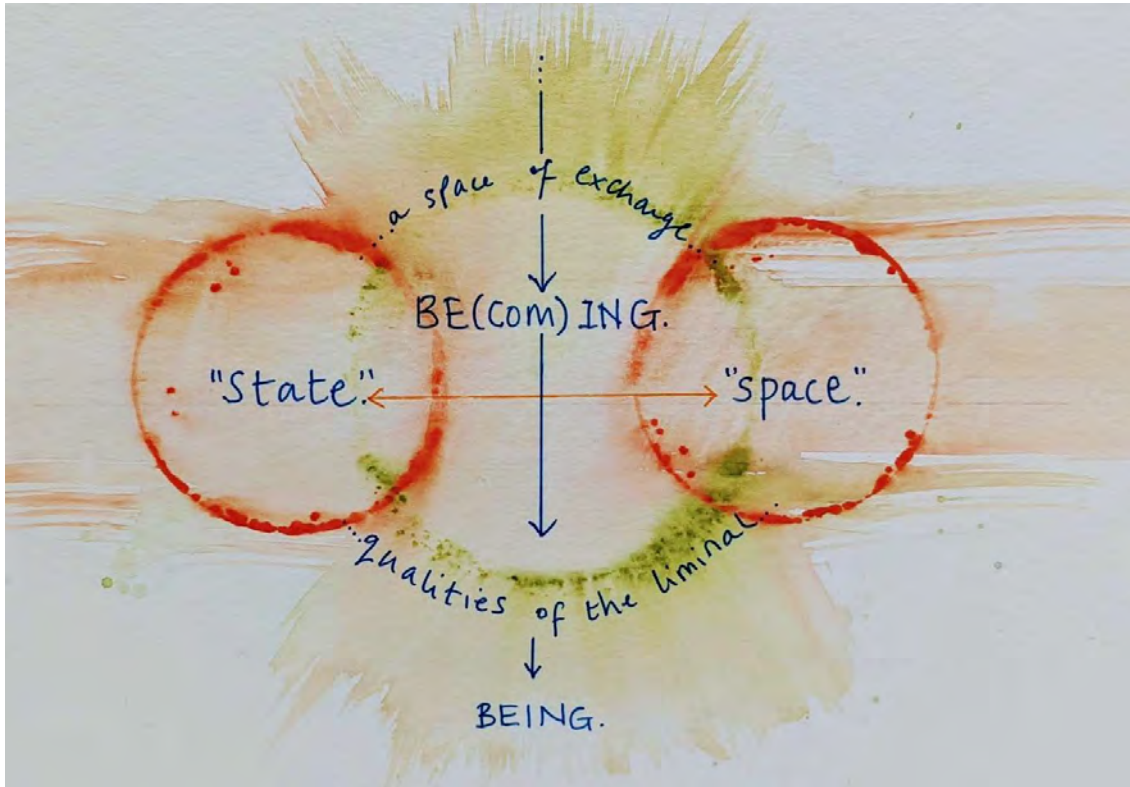


Figure 10 Sally Bailey, *Qualities of the Liminal*, painting-diagram, 2021.

re/defining

This chapter has presented some of the many associated nuances of the liminal; each one taking a different name -the betwixt, the between, the Third Space, to name but a few. This multiplicity of labels and interpretations serves only to highlight the difficulty of using term 'liminal', and the need to clearly explain my own application of the concept, and the function and potential of the liminal that I envisage within the painting process. In the following chapter, I work towards the presentation of a re-imagining and re-defining of the liminal space in contemporary painting.

⁵⁹My notion of 'be(com)ing', as a quality of the liminal, is explored in the following chapter.

I also examine whether ultimately it may be necessary to define a new term altogether, mindful that it may be easier to leave a definition in terms of what something is *not*, in order to determine what that something *is*. In attempting to define a 'liminal place', there lies a danger in un-defining its very being. By forcing a 'fit', a 'structure', this may only serve to emphasise the *anti*-structure, and the refusal to be pinned down. I am aware of the ambiguity in this method; the paradoxical notion of defining something by un-defining it – and thus confirming its status as a notion of in-between.

Finally, I contend that there is also a darker side to liminality to consider. Timothy Carson, writing on liminality from the perspective of religious studies, pleads for caution when seeking out and encountering the liminal, since it exists in a "different category of being, time and space",⁶⁰ and as such presents unknown dangers,

Ironically, to exist at the dangerous margins is also to touch a unique source of power. Hence the liminal state is simultaneously dangerous, polluted, potentially contaminating, as well as power-filled and a source of mysterious fascination.⁶¹

Remember, the liminal is not always your friend.

⁶⁰ Carson, T. (2016) *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power*. Cambridge: Routledge, p4.

⁶¹ Ibid.

Alchemical Investigations

roots

It is difficult to speculate where alchemy truly originated, since it is likely to have evolved through multiple cultures and over significant expanses of time. As a proto-scientific method for the transmutation of base materials into gold, the practice of alchemy can be traced back as far as the first century, to Greco-Roman Egypt where the practice was centred around the ancient city of Alexandria.⁶² The Treatises of Zosimos of Panopolis (c. 300AD) are recognised as the earliest known writings on alchemy,⁶³ detailing the transactions that took place. Etymologically, it seems plausible that the word ‘alchemy’ derives from Chinese word ‘*chim*’, meaning aurifaction – the theoretical assumption that gold can be produced from base metals. There are also claims that the origins of the word can be attributed to the Egyptians, to the Ancient Greek or Arabic cultures,⁶⁴ such was the reach of this ancient practice.

From these early beginnings the practice of alchemy continued to flourish, spreading across Europe in the Middle Ages, and reaching a pinnacle during the scientific revolutions of the 17th Century. As scientific advancements continued to astound through the 17th and 18th centuries, chemistry came to replace alchemy, and it is from this point that the motives, reputation and worth of alchemists came into question.⁶⁵ For it cannot be ignored that throughout history alchemists have often been viewed with a marked degree of suspicion, those practicing this ‘dark art’ being regarded as little more than greedy fraudsters dabbling in the occult.⁶⁶ The culture of secrecy that alchemists adhered to, with their coded spells, mystical illustrations, and obsession with the seemingly impossible, did little to enhance their reputation. Indeed, in Dante’s *Inferno* we find the eighth circle of Hell (figure 10) reserved for all ‘Falsifiers’; alchemists seen as the Falsifiers of Things, were judged to be of no better repute than counterfeiters (Falsifiers of Money), and perjurers (Falsifiers of Words).⁶⁷

It could be argued that the practice of alchemy was never simply about the pursuing the art of transubstantiation. Alchemists also sought to invent and produce exotic elixirs and medicines claiming to cure all ailments, and even to offer the possibility of immortality. But once again, the dubious

⁶² Forbes, R. J. “On the Origin of Alchemy.” *Chymia*, vol. 4, 1953, pp. 1–11. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/27757160. [Accessed 27 May 2020]

⁶³ www.encyclopedia.com/science/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/zosimus-panopolis [Accessed 27 May 2020]

⁶⁴ Klossowski De Rola, S. (2013) *Alchemy: The Secret Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, p17

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p30. Here De Rola writes of the ‘false art’ of alchemy, citing Chaucer: “*This cursed craft whoso wil exercise, He shal no gold have that may him suffice, for al thae gold he spendeth thereabout, He lose shal, thereof I have no doute.*”

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p33

⁶⁷ Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno*, the first part of his epic three-part poem *Divine Comedy*, charts his journey through Hell. Guided by the poet Virgil, they encounter the ‘Falsifiers of Things’ (Canto 29–30).

reputation of the alchemist was often brought into sharp focus, as these potions were often concocted from toxic metallic and mineral elements likely to do the patient more significant harm than good. On a more positive note, it is also important to recognise that in many cultures the alchemist was seen as a spiritual figure, a catalyst to spiritual transformation and the enlightenment of his devotees.⁶⁸ The common thread with all of these alchemical practices throughout history, is simply that the alchemist strives to bring about a fundamental change in matter itself, and it is from this standpoint that I explore whether these ancient alchemical processes can indeed illuminate the processes of contemporary painting that I seek to better understand in terms of the liminal.

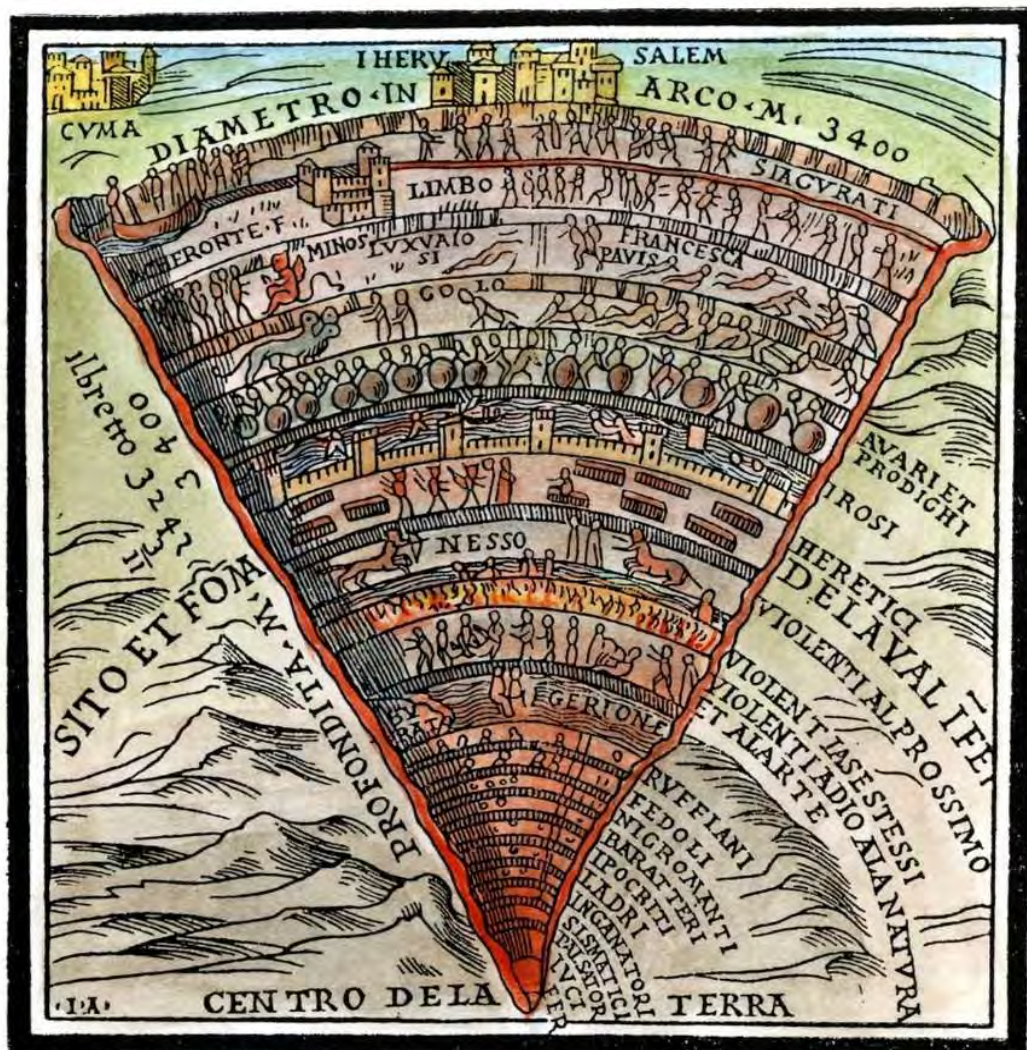


Figure 11 Dantes *Inferno*, print taken from Venetian woodcut c1520.

⁶⁸ Klossowski De Rola, S. (2013) *Alchemy: The Secret Art*. London: Thames and Hudson, p67.

There have been numerous scholars who have tackled the relationship between alchemy and painting, and the opposing standpoints of James Elkins and Urszula Szulakowska⁶⁹ have been key to my initial enquiry. In his seminal text "*What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*",⁷⁰ Elkins explores how the methods harnessed by the Old Masters can be considered akin to mediaeval alchemical processes and remain useful in understanding the material processes that the contemporary painter uses to produce the purest pigments for oil paint. But he also recognises the torture that both endure in their struggle to harness this transubstantive process:

Painting and alchemy are arts, backed by massive literatures on technique and tradition, but they feel like that might collapse at any moment into a rule-less experience. The fundamental anxiety of painterly or alchemical method is that it may not exist.⁷¹

Elkins observation on the anxiety of the painter is very real; a surge of uneasiness overcomes me when faced with the decision 'is this painting finished?'. One more brushstroke could prove to be a fatal mistake, and yet not to attempt it will gnaw at me endlessly. In that instant I cease to be a painter.

Elkins maintains a material focus throughout, only considering alchemy in relation to the physical realm. He goes so far as to suggest that we can only truly understand the materiality of pigments and oil paint in relation to alchemy and alchemical processes – explaining at great lengths the ingredients, the pigments, the recipes, and eulogising on the possibility of magic.

This research builds on the work of Elkins, is informed by the counter arguments, and transposes these alchemical methods onto the *processes* of painting. My argument is that an alchemical investigation of the processes of contemporary painting can articulate the transformational potential of the liminal. I argue that the work of the painter is seeking to transform, and to *be transformed* (oneself) by the medium and the process. These happenings are considered not simply in terms of material/matter/process, but also in terms of the painter as subject, and this is of the utmost importance. I interpret these processes as being akin to an alchemical transubstantive force. And it truly is a force, almost a compulsion that engulfs the painter; indeed, painting is often cited as the work of the obsessive, always striving to do better – but, like the alchemists of old, often chasing the unattainable. To quote DH Lawrence on Cezanne and his internal struggles with his process:

⁶⁹Urszula Szulakowska is a writer and academic who has written extensively on the history of alchemical illustrations and representations from the 1400's to the present day.

⁷⁰ Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is: How to Think about Oil painting, Using the Language of Alchemy*. New York: Routledge.

⁷¹ Ibid. p177

After a tooth and nail fight for forty years, he did succeed in knowing an apple fully; and not quite as fully, a jug or two. But that was all he achieved. It seems very little, and he died embittered.⁷²

And herein lies the truth about the difficulty of painting; for the painter is not necessarily in control of the process. The irony in my own struggle, is that often the harder I strive to succeed with a work, the greater the final degree of failure;⁷³ the physical and mental energies expended in the effort of making can never exceed the forces of the process and the materials in this alchemical bond.

In stark contrast, Szulakowska states her disappointment with Elkins somewhat rigid application of alchemical language to the production of oil paint from pigments, stating that Elkins is "missing the point"⁷⁴ in his over-literal interpretations, and that it is instead his thoughts on how alchemical hieroglyphs in painting can "mediate between written and visual signs"⁷⁵ that warrants further discussion. My own position is contrary, although still compatible, to both of these applications, examining instead the extent to which alchemical language can be used to explore the transubstantive processes that occur within the act of painting, and how a liminal space that facilitates this 'happening' can be defined.

As with the concept of the liminal, this too is an area that has not previously been widely researched or written about (in the context of painting process), and I accepted the challenge with some trepidation. For alchemy and the liminal are both messy, ambiguous and shape-shifting entities; they are ungraspable, potentially unknowable and unmeasurable, not notions that lend themselves easily to the rigours of academic research.

investigation

When the inner space of painting is approached through a process of alchemical investigation, I contend that this pathway is one of experimental manipulation of material and of process, of intense observation, of critical interrogation, and most importantly of seeking to transform, and *to be transformed* by the medium and the process. This is the connection that I argue links the process of painting to the processes pursued by the alchemists of old, and hence I have named my search for knowledge an 'alchemical investigation'.

⁷² Boulton, J.T. ed (2004) *D.H. Lawrence: Late Essays and Articles*. London:Cambridge University Press, p202.

⁷³ The occurrence and function of failure in painting is discussed as part of my Liminal Methodology, as set out in Chapter Three.

⁷⁴ Szulakowska, U. (2016) *Alchemy in Contemporary Art*. Oxford: Routledge, p5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

The relationship between alchemy and creative processes is a recursive one; there are many similarities between the two, to the extent perhaps that the creative process *requires* there to be an awareness and inclusion of alchemical investigations in order to *be*? For the trajectory journeyed by the painter, into a liminal space, locating a 'space of exchange', and the potentials for becoming contained within, and the extricating of oneself, changed by the encounter, where painter and painting once again become separate entities, bears all the hallmarks of transformational alchemical forces.

language

Karen Pinkus, author of *Alchemical Mercury: A Theory of Ambivalence*, writes somewhat disparagingly of the notion that painting can be understood through the language and process of alchemy, positing that the term has been widely overused of recent. Pinkus observes that:

It has been conjured by contemporary critics and artists to describe work that involves material mutations or a certain disposition to experimenting with temporality.⁷⁶

Although Pinkus acknowledges the connections between alchemy and painting - both being concerned as the transmutation of matter - she is dismissive of the effectiveness of such an approach. Pinkus bluntly describes alchemy as "the old science of struggling with materials, and not quite understanding what is happening."⁷⁷ But although "not quite understanding" could be interpreted negatively, I perceive this differently, since this state of 'un-knowing'⁷⁸ fosters the pursuing of an experimental approach and allows room for risk-taking and the thrill of chance happenings. As Rebecca Fortnum writing on the negative associations of the unknown, the not yet known, and the spaces between observes:

...here describes a kind of liminal space where not knowing is not only overcome, but sought, explored, and savoured; where failure, boredom, frustration and getting lost are constructively deployed alongside wonder, secrets and play.

Therefore, my own position is this – that the language of alchemy can be applied successfully, serving to illuminate the oft-thought mystical and transubstantive processes of painting. There are seven identified stages to the alchemical process – *calcinatio*, *sublimatio*, *solutio*, *putrefactio*, *distillatio*, *coagulation*, *tincture*. I put forward that these seven stages (burning, purification, combining (with

⁷⁶ Pinkus, K. (2009) *Alchemical Mercury: A Theory of Ambivalence*. USA: Stanford University Press, p3

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Fisher, E. & Fortnum R. (2013) *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. London: Black Dog Publishing, p7.

liquid), fermenting, distilling, forming a new substance, and the application of it) be used as a method/framework for understanding alchemical process within practice:

1. calcinatio (burning). I interpret this initial beginning of the alchemical process as being akin to the moment the painter stands before a fresh canvas. All notions of what has passed before are put aside; the ground is razed.

2. sublimatio (purification). The painter gathers her tools and materials, her thinking is focused, and she starts anew.

3. solutio (combining with liquid). Here, I envisage that the painter/process/medium become a single fluid entity immersed in this transubstantive process. The painter is one with her process.

4. putrefactio (fermenting). As the 'space of exchange' is reached, there occurs the potential for rebirth; the arena of be(com)ing is approached.

5. distillatio (distilling). The transformative potentials of the alchemical process are uncovered and absorbed.

6. coagulatio (forming a new substance) The forces contained and expelled during this process come back together; they are manifested in material form, as painting.

7. tinctura (application) Now removed from the process, the painter and painting (as object) are now separated. This is the point at which the strands of thinking, making, being, start to come together – weaving, interconnected, indexical and yet interdependent.

as knowledge

Danielle Boutet, academic and painter, writes extensively on the relationship between art and alchemy, seeing both as a model for knowledge making – but one that produces a type of knowledge far removed from the objective, analytic and measurable knowledges produced through scientific investigation:

Both the alchemist and the artist think through matter, by way of aesthetic/symbolic operations. This is not a thinking process where one finds the answers to questions, but rather

where one contemplates and experiences situations, themes or feeling complexes (or ways of being).⁷⁹

Here Boutet suggests that art practice, like alchemical practice, is a way of knowing that manifests itself through the materiality of those processes, utilising the forces of transformation and transubstantiation as a threshold to new knowledge. Both art and alchemy are considered to be modalities of embodied knowing; it is through encountering, experiencing, seeing and feeling that art is able to *make* meaning.

Boutet dismisses the notion of art purely as a mode of expression and challenges the traditional notion that objective knowledge is the sole preserve of scientific research. But herein lies the problem – like the mediaeval Alchemist, the contemporary painter must find ways to articulate this mode of knowing if a successful challenge to these long-held hierarchical divisions between art-knowledge and science-knowledge is to be made. Boutet recognises this difficulty:

The Alchemist has, through the Work, an embodied materialised knowledge, difficult if not impossible to translate into writing.⁸⁰

This difficulty in articulating this artistic, experiential knowledge is one that I understand only too well; I suggest that this embodied and emergent knowledge exists in the *processes* of making – and not in the objects themselves. I envisage this knowledge forming from the between spaces in the painting process, and that this process is an act of performative inquiry – a notion that will be explored in the Chapter Six. Moreover, I consider that the painting process offers more than a way of knowing – it operates as a mode of *being*.

Art does not express something external or remote; it is not ‘about something’. It is itself that something...Unlike the ideas, feelings and impressions that we verbalise or describe, the meaning does not pre-exist: it comes into existence with the work. This is why art can be at once a mode of expression and a mode of knowing.⁸¹

I push forward in my search for answers.

⁷⁹ Barrett, E. & Bolt, B. (2013) *Carnal Knowledge: Towards a “New Materialism” Through the Arts*. London: IB Tauris, p24.

⁸⁰ Boutet, D. Vision and Experience: The Contribution of Art to Transdisciplinary Knowledge. *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering and Science: Volume 4*. Available at: <https://www.atlas-tjes.org/index.php/tjes/article/view/46> [Accessed 18 July 2019]

⁸¹ *ibid*.



Figure 12 Sally Bailey. *Untitled*, 2019. Oil on vellum, 30cm x 28cm.

Interlude

I paint
I think
I write
I un-paint
I un-think
I un-write
I repaint
I rethink
I rewrite

This process forms a continuous loop, an entanglement of seemingly disparate threads catching on invisible barbs as the loop rotates. I am in the middle, often nauseous, looking for the exit points and the brief moments of lucidity. They are few and far between.

I am searching for the edges in the darkness, I need something to hold on to.

Where is this journey taking me? Far away from anything that I know - beyond what is known and into the unknown. An uncertain territory where the answers may remain unattainable. I am strangely unworried at this possibility. I inhabit this liminal place....and I continue to paint, to un-paint, to repaint...

(Excerpt, reflective journal, December 2016)

Chapter Two - What Painting Is/Isn't/Could Be

"I would like to write like a painter. I would like to write like painting...Just at the moment of the instant, in what unfurls, I touch down and then let myself slip into the depth of the instant itself... And what is a painter? A bird-catcher of instants."

Helene Cixous, *Coming To Writing and Other Essays* (1991)

Painting a Picture

death of painting

Painting has long been considered an unfashionable pursuit - ever since Paul Delaroche allegedly declared 'from today, painting is dead' in 1839⁸² when, mesmerised by his first encounter with a daguerreotype photographic image, Delaroche could see no future for the laboured art of representational painting. The death of painting has been declared many times since Delaroches' famous statement; the invention of photography was undoubtedly a serious blow, as was a movement towards conceptual art in the early twentieth century. And yet painting persists. As Jonathan Harris notes:

Certainly, painting is not what... John Golding once claimed of it: 'the aristocrat of the arts'. But painting remains, as TJ Clark remarked about abstract art in particular, 'hideously lively'. Painting, perhaps, is *always* being revived and *always* being kicked in the teeth by someone.⁸³

More recently, in a marginally less dramatic statement, academic and author Anne Ring Peterson considers that "painting inhabits an ambivalent position as a discipline that appears to be simultaneously exhausted and inexhaustible."⁸⁴

Either way, the prognosis for painting looks bleak.

This research challenges Peterson's view from a fresh standpoint and I argue that there are new ways in which painting can be encountered and understood. Utilising notions of the between, the in-between and the transubstantive discussed in Chapter One, here I contend that a new perspective of the painting process can be revealed, and from this can be developed a new methodology for the research of painting (and wider visual arts production). This not only allows painting to be viewed as relevant, but also revitalises and extends painting practice and discourse. The development of such a research methodology and the critical importance of it bringing together painting practice and theory, as *research*, will be fully explored in the following chapter. But first it is necessary to determine what contemporary painting *is*, what painting *isn't*, and what painting *could be*. This chapter seeks to enable

⁸² Myers, T.R. ed. (2011) *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p12.

⁸³ Harris, J. ed. (2003) *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*. Tate Liverpool and Liverpool University Press, p236.

⁸⁴ Peterson, A.R. (2013) *Contemporary Painting in Context*. Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, p10.

new perspectives into the possibilities of painting in order to reshape what it is, the territory it occupies and how it is encountered.

As I am exploring the boundaries of (non)representational painting, it is important to acknowledge that for centuries the created hierarchies and complete dominance of representational painting made it so utterly entrenched in art history that the contemporary artworld is still not fully able to shake the need to periodically 'reinvent' painting. As one example, in the 1950s Abstract painting was elevated to a 'superior' status (above all other artforms) by the influential voices of critics such as Clement Greenberg. Greenberg argued that the most important aspect of a painting was its articulation of the medium, and the elimination of anything that detracted from this exploration of materiality, line, or colour. Renowned for his championing of Abstract Expressionism (and the work of Jackson Pollock in particular), Greenberg wrote:

Abstract Expressionism is usually characterised, in failure as well as in success, by a fresher, more open, more immediate surface. Whether it is enamel paint reflecting light, or thinned paint soaked into unsized and unprimed canvas, the surface manages somehow to *breathe*. There is no insulating finish, nor is the pictorial space created "pictorially", by deep or veiled color; it is a question rather of blunt and corporeal contrasts and of optical illusions difficult to specify. Nor is the picture "packaged", wrapped up and sealed in to declare it as easel painting; the shape of the picture itself is treated less as a receptacle given in advance than as open field whose unity must be permitted to *emerge* instead of being imposed or forced upon it.⁸⁵

This shift in perception of what painting can/could be is critical. Greenberg advocated that painting no longer had to *mean*, to represent or re/present; abstract painting does not demand to be read translated or unravelled – it exists purely as its own explanation. This notion underpins my own argument as to how the reconceptualising of the liminal as a 'space of exchange' can offer new ways to encounter painting; within this thesis I advocate a notion of 'being-with', explored in Chapter Six.

So, what *is* painting today? Until the latter part of the 18th century, in Europe the pursuit of painting was largely regarded as being primarily for the representation and explanation of things, objects and happenings in the lived world and in the heavens; to illuminate, educate, inform, influence and astound. Painting was considered to be 'high art'; those that could afford to commission paintings banked on ownership and prominent display confirming their elevated status in society, whilst those able to produce such paintings were often considered masters of unfathomable skill. But that was then. What about the now? And critically, what about the future?

⁸⁵ Greenberg, C. (1989) *Art and Culture: Critical Essays*. Massachusetts: Beacon Press, p125.

I have already stated the aim of this research to re-establish the primacy of process in relation to how painting can be encountered and understood when viewed through the conceptual lens of the liminal. I consider this new understanding to also be key in the continued resuscitation of painting, be that from an art-historical perspective through to the expanded and ever-expanding positioning of contemporary painting. I argue in this chapter that this can be achieved through a revised understanding of what painting is/isn't/could be, and a re-imagining of the process and practice of contemporary painting.



Figure 13 Sally Bailey, fragment ii.

Throughout this chapter I include small pictorial fragments of my thinking as expressed through my painting process. My intention is that they aid the reader in a better understanding of how a painting might be brought into being, revealing the layers of paint applied, the edges of things unresolved, the movement and moments of transition. These fragments are designated as formal Figures within the text but are to be read as small punctuation marks between that elucidate and complement my argument.

To begin this conversation, I will refer to the writings of Mira Schor, who reduces the complex and sensuous relationship of painter and painting down to the bare mechanics of the encounter:

Some people live by what they see with their eyes – light, darkness, colour, form. Painters are compelled to express this continuous act of seeing and looking through the application of a liquid or viscous matter on a two-dimensional surface.⁸⁶

For some, this may indeed seem to be a succinct (if not simplistic) appraisal of what painting is; but perhaps not for the painter, and certainly not for the post-Delarochean painter. I use this term, *post-Delarochean painter*, to articulate how the contemporary painter and her painting practice has had to evolve and adapt to a world where, as Rowley and Pollock define, painting today exists in a “hybrid moment”,⁸⁷ a moment from which there can be no return:

No one could deny that the decisive postmodernist shift towards photography, video, installation, performance, the use of found materials and new digital media has left the practice of painting, that was once so hegemonic, in critical limbo. The conditions of any artistic practice are now both ‘expanded and complex’...Who would want to join the band nostalgic for simpler times when painting ruled and everything was *pure*?⁸⁸

The future health of contemporary painting requires an understanding that painting is more than the meeting of brush and canvas, and certainly more than a set of static formulae – the golden ratio, the colour wheel, laws of perspective, and concept of the gaze, for instance. Painting as a practice and a process exists in a space beyond the ‘science’ of painting, the mathematics of composition, and the physics of material and matter. As critic Howard Halle wrote: “...‘painting’ is a philosophical enterprise that doesn’t always involve paint.”⁸⁹ Thus, in this context, even paint is not needed to ‘paint a picture’ at all, since metaphorically this is referencing any activity that can stimulate the senses and the imagination, and to use the mind’s eye to form that picture within.

And thus, another ingredient is required. I argue that to engage with, and to ensure the continued resuscitation of contemporary painting, it is necessary to explore new methods of encountering painting, and expanded understandings of what painting can and could be. Schor, following on from her evaluation of the painting process, concludes that this narrow view of the painters practice is incomplete, for this is to omit from the considering of process and painting the notion that it should be seen “in the thickness of ‘co-presence’, where the richness of visual information facilitates paintings conversation with painting as medium, space, substance and history”.⁹⁰ This stands as a true

⁸⁶ Schor, M. (1996) *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. New York: Duke University Press, p144.

⁸⁷ Harris, J. ed. (2003) *Critical Perspectives on Contemporary Painting: Hybridity, Hegemony, Historicism*. Tate Liverpool and Liverpool University Press, p37.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p38

⁸⁹ Myers, T.R. ed. (2011) *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p15.

⁹⁰ Schor, M. (1996) *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. New York: Duke University Press, p187.

vindication of Rottmann's earlier statement (see Introduction: process/painting); but where does this leave painting today?



Figure 14 Sally Bailey, fragment iii.

First it is necessary to look past the weighted and heavy history of painting and consider the activity of contemporary painting in terms of this expanded field (as defined by Rottmann), extending far beyond the limits of the accepted framing device (and other conventions). We (perhaps) grudgingly acknowledge a fundamental shift in the way we view the world we live in today - all the answers are only ever a 'Google' away, and the mystery of unobtainable information is long gone. The reputation of painting, floundering since the 1960's, has become even less fashionable of late perhaps, because it does not fit readily into this new way of looking - painting is inherently a slow and accretive process, it requires that the maker and the viewer invest precious time in that image. My own position on how painting can operate in a post-Delaroche era is centred around the argument that the focus must shift away from the accepted primacy of the painting-as-object, and instead search for an alternative understanding of the transubstantive and transmutable happenings that exist within the liminal processes of painting itself. The outcome of this epistemic journey will be the delineation of a new conceptual space of fluidity within painting that can challenge established interpretations of painting

is, isn't and could be. And to do this, I am seeking to find answers through the process of painting itself; painting *is* the research.

It is pertinent to begin by problematising traditional ways of thinking in terms of painting. In the Introduction, (*Considering Painting*), I outlined the now non-specificity of the medium of painting, and how the continuing evolution of contemporary painting can contribute to the argument that it *can* still be relevant today. In his essay *Painting Beside Itself*, David Joselit considers that to *stay* relevant going forward, painting must accept that it is essential to maintain a position of "constant transition, rather than a position of imposed stasis",⁹¹ given that a broader understanding of what painting 'is' can be established. In simple terms, far from being dead, painting in this expanded sense can potentially be resuscitated, whilst perhaps the prognosis for painting as a two-dimensional framed object remains less optimistic.

In problematising the long-regarded primacy of the object in painting, *where* we perceive (and *what* we perceive as) value is key. The 'value' in painting is traditionally judged solely on the outcome of the process, with little consideration for the process itself in that e/valuation. The finished work is the prize; the hours of (often solitary) labour, the despair at the many failures, the tormented wrangling with material and matter – these unseen things hold little sway in the harsh, market and non-market (gallery exhibitions, museum collection, etc.) artworld today. This is largely due to the way a painter traditionally works, as already discussed, often revealing very little of the process of making – and perhaps to change the way painting (not simplistically as an object framed and hung, but as an embodied relationship between painter/process/object) is viewed and valued going forward, it will first require the painter to consider her role in that appraisal.

It should also be recognised that the critical value of painting has also come under increasing scrutiny of late. Painting has long been considered by some as an out-moded medium, one perhaps of privilege and pomposity, one not able to engage effectively with the complex political and social landscape⁹² of today. In order to contest this view, I present the work of painters whom I consider *do* engage effectively in this arena; challenging and overcoming this notion of disconnect. Short appraisals of the artists and selected work are included here, to interrupt this chapter, as '*Backdrops*', named as such since their work serves as a backdrop to my own research and practice. I am intrigued by their processes, their thinking, their playful experimentation, their immersion in the liminal and alchemic. These are outlines, snapshots from a moment in time.

⁹¹ Myers, T.R. ed. (2011) *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p218.

⁹² How can the painter tackle issues such as anthropogenic climate change, war, global poverty, human rights issues, geopolitics, racism, and inequality effectively?

#Backdrop

/'bakdrop/

n. the setting, as of a historical event; the background.

Backdrop 1: Li Huasheng
[139 words]

A classically trained Chinese ink-painter, Huasheng left fame behind in 1987 to travel alone through the mountains of Tibet, to live a reclusive life, and contemplate a more spiritual path.

Observing the Tibetan monks, mesmerised by their rhythmic chanting, Huasheng was instinctively drawn to the artistic possibilities of repetition and contemplation. He began to work with hyper-repetitive grid formations as metaphysical representations of the monk's simple ritual existence, and the juxtaposing landscape of the Himalayas.

"When he draws line after line with his thin brush on a vast piece of paper, his mind is stilled, his self disappears, as does the world."

Each line captures a phenomenological 'moment' from this meditative state, not depicting the actual form of the mountains, but by recording the patterns of that landscape within his own consciousness.

A liminal s/place? A space 'between' time?



Figure 15 Li Huasheng, 9616, 1996. Ink on paper.



Figure 16 Li Huasheng, 1402, 2014. Ink on paper.

#Backdrop

/'bakdrɒp/

n. the setting, as of a historical event; the background.

Backdrop 2: Johan Van Mullem

[106 words]



Figure 17 Johan Van Mullem, Exhibition view, 2019.

Reverence – exhibition @ Unit London, Mayfair, 2019. 50 works exploring themes of ‘worship, adoration and awe’. Dramatic and haunting images, reminiscent of Bacon, provocative/evocative.

Notion of the mask repeats – symbol of protection, but also of disguise and concealment, crime and subterfuge.

Deconstruction/regeneration.

“His oeuvre evokes painful psychological interiority that earns him comparisons to Francis Bacon or Glenn Brown in his attempt to, as his current exhibition press release tells it, divine this essence of man.”

"The works have the power to touch things you cannot see or understand. My works do not evoke thoughts or ideas; I consider my work as an art of sublimation."

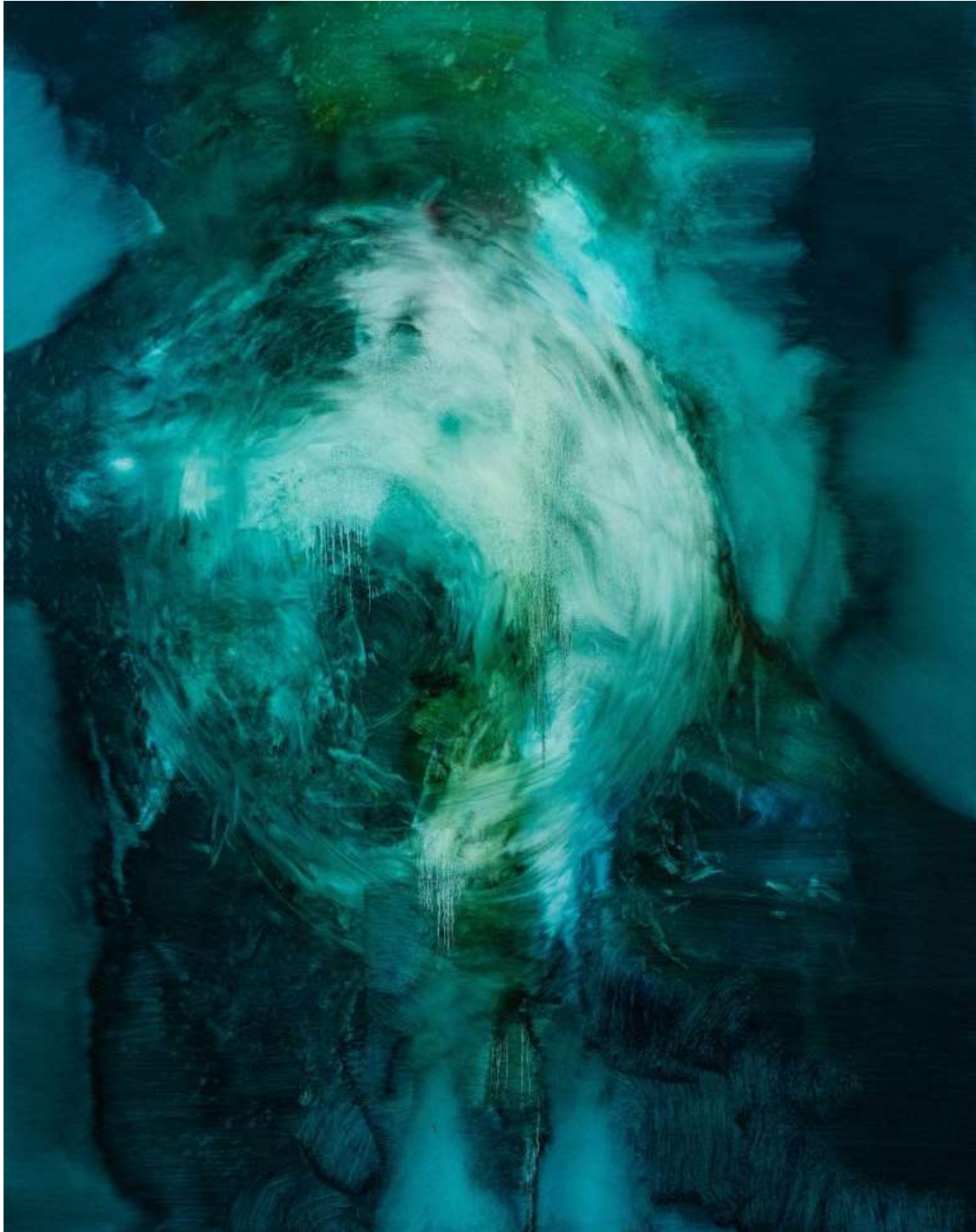


Figure 18 Johan Van Mullen, *Annunciation*, 2018. Ink on canvas, 160cm x 140cm.

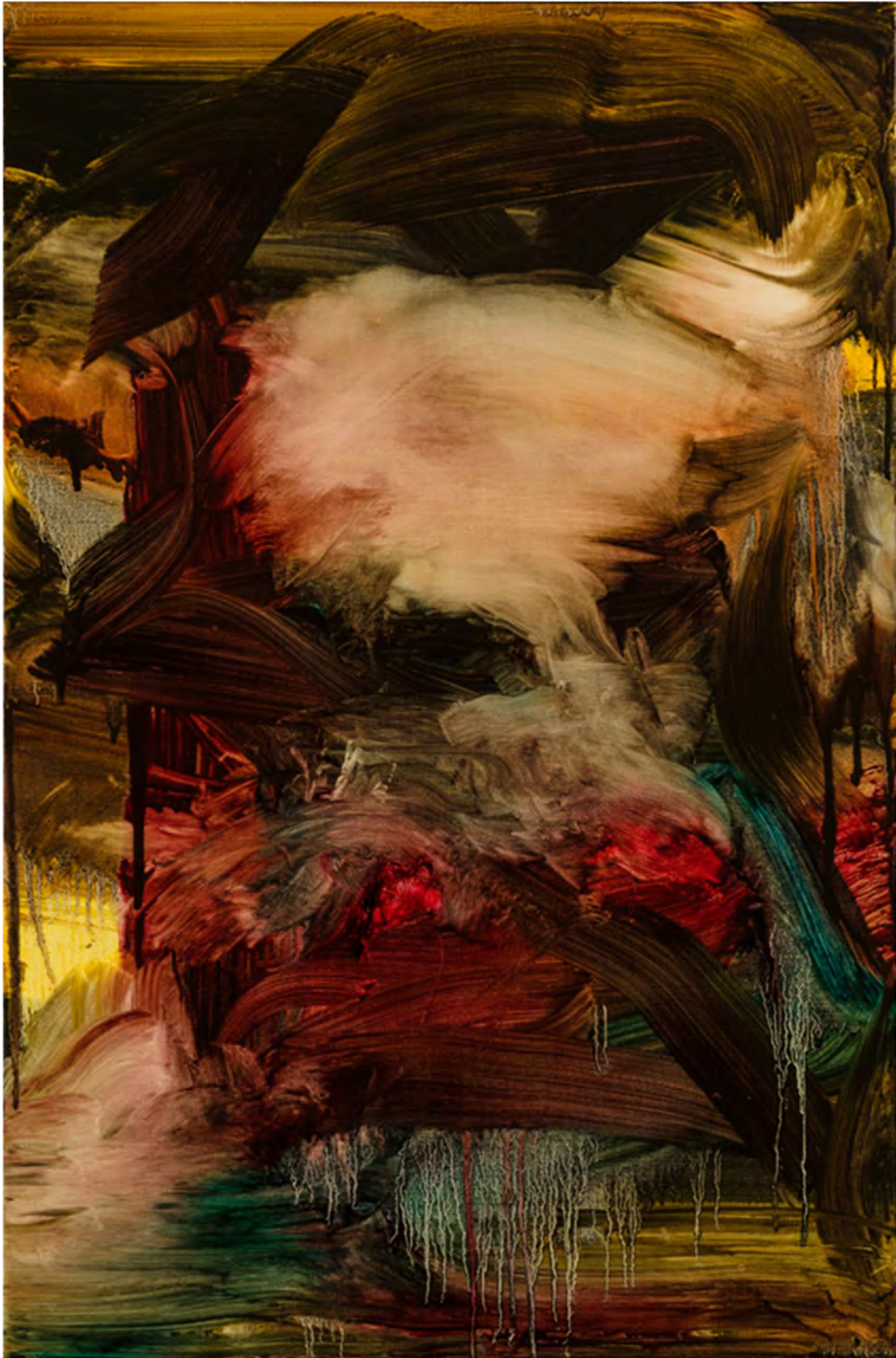


Figure 19 Johan Van Mullen, *Apparition*, 2011. Ink on board, 120cm x 80cm.

#Backdrop

/'bakdrop/

n. the setting, as of a historical event; the background.

Backdrop 3: Raque Ford.

[113 words]



Figure 20 Raque Ford. Installation view, The Lobster Gallery, New York, 2017.

Ford's work occupies a liminal space between writing, painting and sculpture, exploring narratives of female identity through constant juxtaposition: hard/soft, masculine/feminine, colour/monochrome. Her '*painting-sculptures*' are based on her own writings, found text, and song lyrics transformed through the process of making into sensitively configured works.

The notion of 'a painting' is pushed beyond the limit of the traditional frame; the paintings are made on the back surface of the support, and only visible to the viewer as the support Ford chooses to use is sheet Perspex, acrylic or glass. These painted panels are then used in a variety of presentations - wall-mounted, freestanding, or within sculptural forms, juxtaposed with heavy metalwork and man-made objects.



Figure 21 Raque Ford, Installation view, 2017.

#Backdrop

/'bakdrop/

n. the setting, as of a historical event; the background.

Backdrop 4: Zhang Enli

[230 words]



Figure 22 Zhang Enli, *The Box*. Installation view, Hauser & Wirth, 2014.

Enli's recent works, *space-paintings*, present painting as immersive installation. Influenced by the techniques of traditional Chinese brush painting, Enli uses heavily thinned oil paints to create enormous washes of translucent colour over every available surface of the interior space sourced. The thin glazes leave the faint traces of pencil grid-markings visible beneath, providing a sense of underlying order beneath the haziness of the initial encounter.

'the muted tones and thin application of the paint make the objects seem not quite present, as if occupying a liminal reality where only the essence of the object is depicted on the surface.' (Hauser&Wirth)

In September 2018 Enli set up an open studio at the Royal Academy School, within the Life Room. Here, he painted for nine days, allowing the public to watch his process as the work developed.

'Your immediate experience, of course is that you walk through the picture plane as an act of sort being inside a painting. He will paint the floor as well. The painting will really inhabit the place; it doesn't preclude or stop any activities happening within it—we may well have events in there, and those will happen "within" a painting. This abstract approach is also still capable of not being seen as just set painting. There is something so decisively painterly about it. It's a vast space, though he's a fast painter, and so dedicated.'

http://www.randian-online.com/np_feature/its-a-sustained-curiosity-ica-director-gregor-muir-on-zhang-enli/



Figure 23 Zhang Enli, *A Room That Can Move*. Installation view, Power Station of Art, Shanghai, 2021.

post-expanded field (?)

Daniel Birnbaum, curator and critic, stated that:

Painting no longer exists as a strictly circumscribed mode of expression: rather it is a zone of contagion, constantly branching out and widening its scope. Painterly practices emerge in other genres, such as photography, video, sculpture, printmaking and installation.⁹³

This is important in the context of this research – painting is no longer at the top of the hierarchical canon of Art, if indeed the concept of the canon is still considered applicable today. As Birnbaum related, contemporary painting must involve itself in wider engagement to maintain relevancy; to acknowledge a spreading and exchange of ideas, concepts, and processes between the once distinct disciplines of art practice, and to embrace this notion - for this is how the world works today, this is the *now*. My own argument, however, is one of a conceptual contagion rather than a physical/material/formal hybridisation per se. I contend that for painting to survive and be relevant today, it needs to be continually rejuvenated - but that this is achieved through a position of enduring reflexivity and evolution. This could occur through a shift to a *post-expanded* field that is not just underpinned by what painting *is*, but also what it *could be*, through a recognition of the potentialities within. The liminal, and the alchemies afforded by the 'space of exchange' that I argue for, are important in this logic, enabling an open-ended, fertile, and generative space of possibility and plausibility.

And in this *post-expanded* field (for is there anywhere left for painting to go?), it may be concluded therefore that we are no longer able to rely on a singular explanation of what painting is, and a safer way to 'define' painting is to instead consider the *could-be*?

Painting remains important.⁹⁴

⁹³ Myers, T.R. ed. (2011) *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p16.

⁹⁴ This is very possibly not the place for a joke, but as a painter, this one makes me laugh every time. "What is the definition of Sculpture? Something you back into in the gallery trying to get a better view of the Painting!"

Notions of Presencing

Heidegger's concept of 'presencing'⁹⁵ is a complex and multifaceted one, subject to many interpretations. It is a concept that is not bound by a single mode of temporality, encompassing both presence - our *being* in the present, and presencing - understood as the *making* present, *of* being. As Heidegger summarises this concept, "a boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which *something begins its presencing*."⁹⁶ Importantly, presencing is not an event or mode of existence that can happen in isolation, it requires a connectedness to being, and to being within the known world, for this is where our understanding of the world is situated. In terms of this research, I use this latter interpretation of the term to inform my new concept of the liminal of the liminal and its centrality in the process the start of a painting journey and its transformative potential. Jeff Malpas deftly unpicks Heidegger's notion of presencing, recognising that it encapsulates threads of thinking that are central to our understanding of being. He concludes that Heidegger's model represents:

[a] transcendental mode of proceeding...presence does not mean being in some indeterminate or general sense – presence is always a matter of a specific "there". It is indeed the establishment and opening up of a place.⁹⁷

On first reading this appears a contradictory statement; that presencing can be offered as an abstract or metaphysical concept (the transcendental), whilst simultaneously being reliant on locating a notion of 'place' (a specific 'there'). However, in a close analysis of Heidegger's writing, Malpas contends that Heidegger is concerned with the notion of place on multiple levels; one level being that a defined 'place' is the origin of thinking, an activity that spans both realms:

Place...as the proper horizon of thinking, that holds thinking within it...as that which is the proper origin of thinking, out of which thinking emerges and from which it gains its direction and sustenance.⁹⁸

It is within this 'place' that I am positioning my concept of presencing; reimagined as the time/space/moment *between* events – essentially an emergence from one state of being to another. It is an '*in-between*': presencing exists within the liminal, not as a static experience, but as a transformative one. It is characterised by a desire for progression, and a moving forward – although one that will inevitably involve risk taking, uncertainty and chance. At this point, the outcomes are unknown and unformed; since by their very nature the outcomes are bound up with, and emerge

⁹⁵ Heidegger, M. *Being and Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).

⁹⁶ Heidegger, M. (2006) *Building, Dwelling, Thinking*. London: MIT Press, p254.

⁹⁷ Malpas, J. (2008) *Heidegger's Topology: Being, Place, World*. London: MIT, p13.

⁹⁸ Malpas, J. (2012) *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*. London: MIT Press, p17.

from, process. I argue for the painter embracing this state of flux and anticipating the unlocked potentials that wait to be uncovered.



Figure 24 Sally Bailey, fragment iv.

The articulation of a concept of presencing is a difficult challenge, for this the most nebulous of notions; a fluid space, an experiencing of *something* that has no definite edges, rules, or promises. As Yve Lomax writes of such multiplicitous spaces:

Both inside and outside, but also neither inside nor outside: what we have here is a state of affairs where something else is involved, where something else is implied, where continually we find ourselves *between things*.⁹⁹

Resonating with Lomax, I put forward that this in-between space of presencing represents the transitional phase of the liminal, or at least the possibility of it. I propose therefore, that presencing be considered as a time/space/inhabiting (a state or movement) that allows for quiet deconstruction of thinking, method and process, and the potential for the re-presentation of the knowledges gained within.

⁹⁹ Lomax, Y. (2008) *Writing the Image*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, p148.

I return to the writings of Mira Schor, and initially to her concept of the *w/whole*.¹⁰⁰

We are presented with the possibility that the female experience of container/contained, inside/outside...[that] intimates that woman is not just a lack, not just a hole, but a *w/whole*; that the lacks represented are full metaphors for the membrane between thought and matter, life and death, which is at the core of all art.¹⁰¹

Whilst Schor presents the *w/whole* in relation to female subjectivity and gender representation in painting, it has profound resonance with my own theories relating to the inter-connections between the painting process and the liminal. I utilise this notion to better articulate the spatio-temporal nature of presencing, becoming, and the 'space of exchange' (the 'hole') within the painting process (the 'whole'). For although the liminal in this context embodies the essence of that which is 'between', its importance to the structure of the *w/whole* is fundamental.¹⁰²

I turn to Schor's concept of *terrains vague*.¹⁰³ '*Terrains vague*' is a French phrase that commonly describes the barren, scruffy, weed-infested areas found in all urban spaces - the forgotten and uninhabited 'between' spaces of the cityscape. Schor relates this to the process and function of painting, claiming that these '*vague*' between spaces represent the points where painting exist, arguing that these 'terrains vague' are:

spaces of waves, the sea of liquidity, where the eye flows idly and unconstructed, uninstructed. These spaces are vague, not vacant... In such interstices painting lives, allowing entry at just these points of "imperfection", of neglect between figure/ground... Paintings are vague terrains on which paint, filtered through the human eye, mind, and hand, flickers in and out of representation, as figure skims ground, transmitting thought.¹⁰⁴

I build on this notion, relating it to the sense of the liminal within the painting process, and no longer referring to the cityscape – I contend that these spaces are not unpopulated and barren at all, but exist instead as the fertile space where painting and Painting *become*.

Schor's writings have a beguiling, strangely unsettling quality, disrupting discourse on the subject of contemporary painting and feminism and open up a seductive space for critique. These writings were

¹⁰⁰Schor, M. (1997) *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. London: Duke University Press, p61.

¹⁰¹Ibid. p61.

¹⁰²The writings of Mira Schor have been key to this research. My initial encounter with the concept of *w/whole* was the spark that initially ignited my ambition for this project, and through which I was able to utilise the fragile membranes that shape our being to explore the permeable boundaries of the liminal within the painting process.

¹⁰³Ibid. p155

¹⁰⁴Ibid. p155.

ground-breaking at the time, and indeed remain pertinent today; I acknowledge that this text has provided the building blocks for this research, providing structure, and enabling me to take this concept forward into my own thinking. As one example, it is interesting that Schor describes the process of painting as one filtered through the vision, the thinking, and the physical movement of the painter; that this process is embodied, and the outcome manifests itself as a physical re/presentation of those processes. However, to further build on these ideas it is useful to consider layering this with the more recent writings of Laura Marks on the concept of 'haptic visuality' and examine how this could give further insight into the processes involved in creative production, and how this relates to notions of the liminal in those between spaces. An exploration of this line of enquiry is found in Chapter Six.



Figure 25 Sally Bailey, fragment v.

I argue that it is by releasing ourselves to the notion of presencing that we are able to move through and between the permeable boundaries of the liminal. As we encounter this space of the liminal, we are exposed to the essence of its being, able to sense, feel, imagine it. But only if we are lucky, determined and wily; for this space of the liminal may not always reveal those essences of the transubstantive and the transformational to us. Knowledges emerge as painting and painter are transformed; once entangled as a singular form within the 'space of exchange', the Painting (as object) has now been bestowed with its own essences and can come into being. Painter and Painting are from one, but forever separated.

Otto Scharmer, academic and writer, considers the process of creative thinking in relation to the realms of organisational theory and business management, and is renowned for the development of his 'Theory U'¹⁰⁵(figure 12). Throughout his writing on the importance of *presencing* to the creative process he stresses that it requires a measure of 'letting go' and 'letting come', having an openness to the process in setting aside what is known in order to accept the new, in order to reach this place of change.¹⁰⁶ Scharmer writes of this journey down, round, and up from the 'U', and the transformational power it holds:

Presencing, the blending of sense and presence, means to connect from the source of the highest future possibility and bring it into the now...the territory at the bottom of the 'U' is where we connect with the source of inner knowing...the threshold that needs to be crossed in order to connect to one's real source of presence, creating a power.¹⁰⁷

Sense here is positioned as our perception of what we might hope to achieve, we are envisaging our future self. Presencing, which Otto Scharmer uses in the context of our being *in* the present, allows us to bring this future possibility into the reality of the now:

In that state we step into our own real being, who we really are, our authentic self. Presencing is the movement that lets us approach our self from the emerging future.¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁵ Otto Scharmer, C. (2018) *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*. USA: Berrett-Koehler Publishing.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. p10

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. p25

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. p25

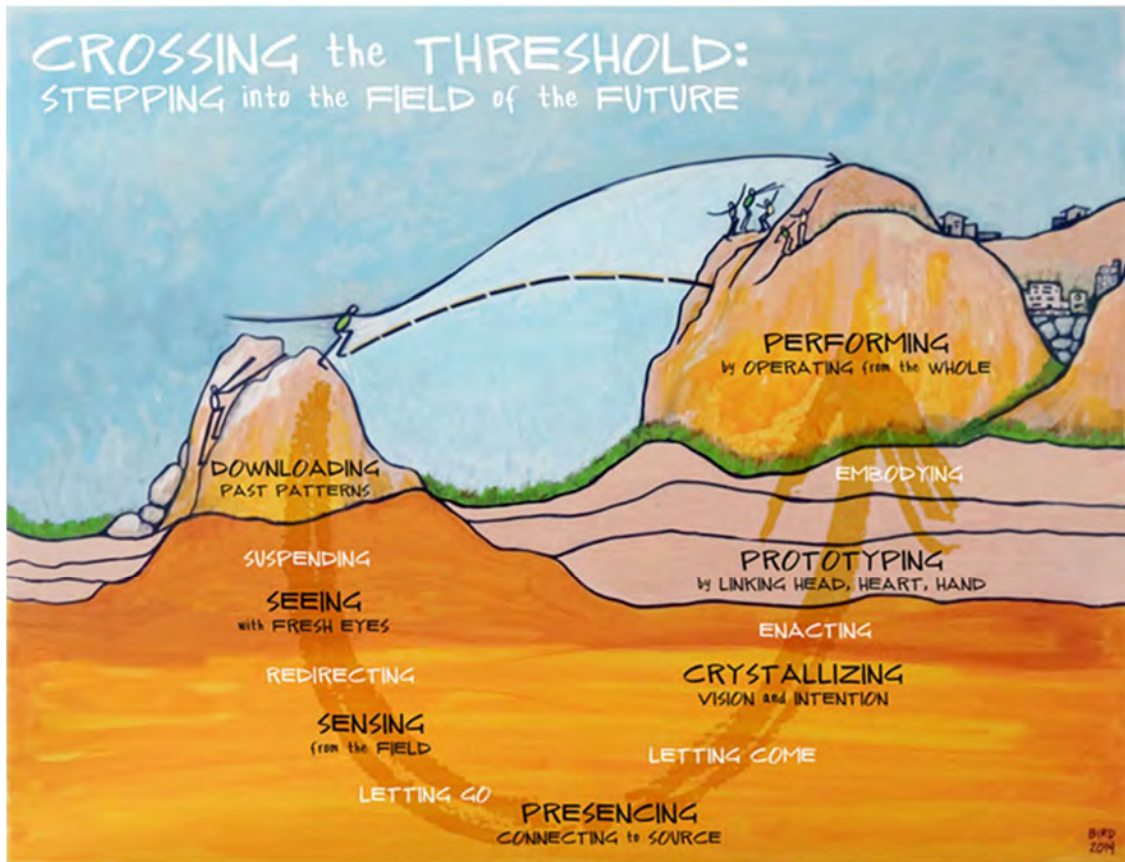


Figure 26 Otto Scharmer, C. *The Essentials of Theory U: Core Principles and Applications*, 2018.

The diagram above is Otto Scharmer's vision of this process, many parts of it relatable to thinking around notions of presencing (and becoming) in painting in this research. This too demands a 'letting go' as identified by Scharmer; for the painter to embrace the suspension of time and activity within the liminal, in order to connect with the 'space of exchange' therein. As a state of presencing is embraced, the painter reaches a position of 'letting come', whereby the transition to a new state of becoming appears possible.

And here I offer a reimagining of Scharmer's vision in the context of this research (figure 13), as a painting-diagram to better articulate my argument to the reader:

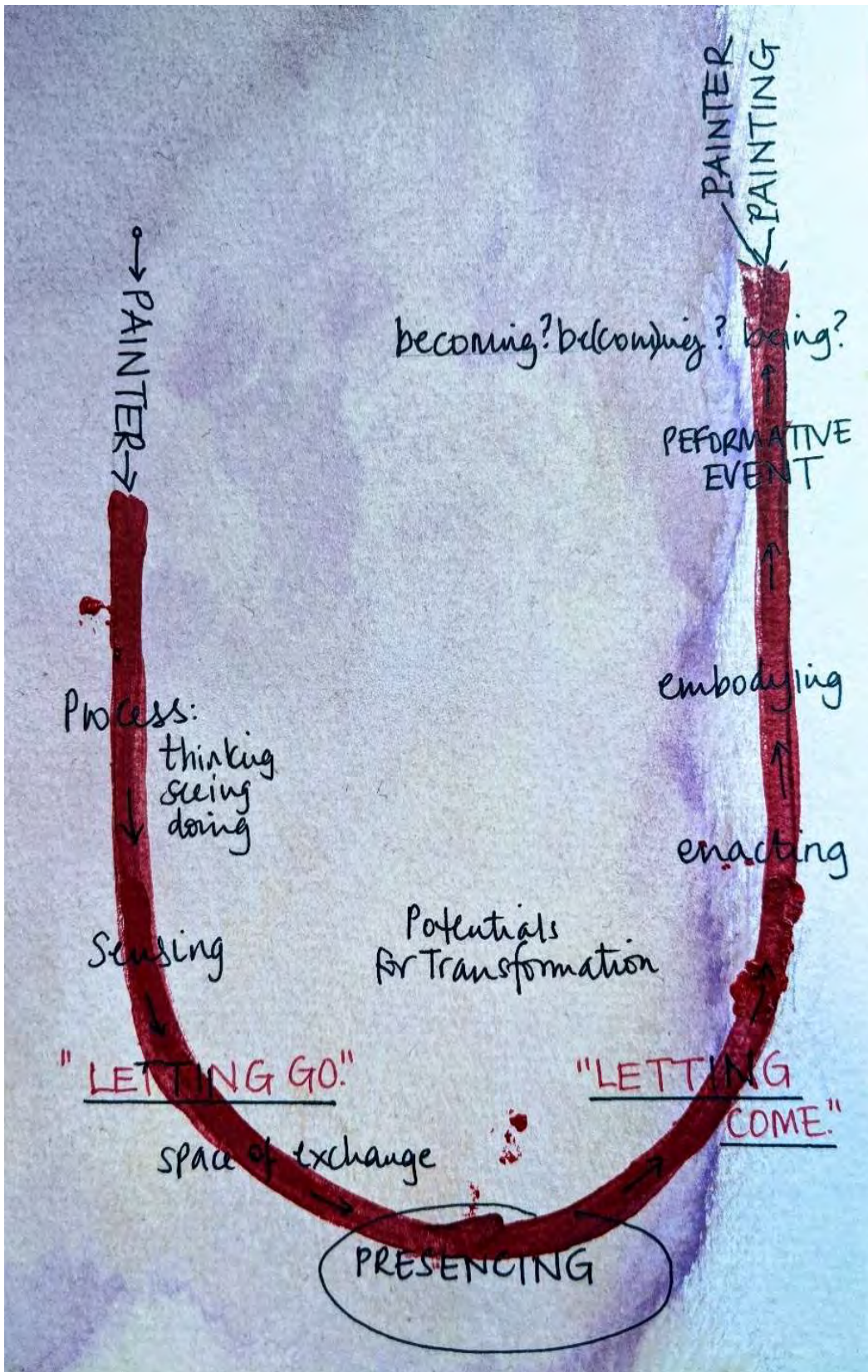


Figure 27 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Theory U)*, 2021. Gouache, pen on A4 watercolour paper.

And so, I come to consider in more detail my own journey through presencing to becoming; I turn to the writings of Helene Cixous for inspiration. Cixous defines four terrains that are traversed throughout her own process of poetic writing;¹⁰⁹ these terrains are articulated as that of deconstruction, experimentation, subversion, and transgression,¹¹⁰ notions that I map to this research.

Deconstruction I argue that Cixous's concept of deconstruction relates to the outset of the painting process, whereby the painter must *un-know* what has gone before and prepare for a new journey – for the outcome can never be presumed, and the past never repeated. This is where I assert that presencing begins.

Experimentation This relates to the time spent in the studio¹¹¹, facing the canvas; every mark made is a unique experience, and cannot be pre-empted, each mark made building on the last. Experimentation slides seamlessly into acts of subversion.

Subversion Here, new ways of doing and being wait to be uncovered. The painter may begin to feel that the process can be tentatively steered in one direction or another, and that an endpoint can be shaped.

Transgression For the painter this is the culmination of the process, where painting *becomes*.

These terrains however do not exist in isolation as separate entities; I envisage that they are imbricated, co-existing and overlapping to create a greater *w/hole*.¹¹² In painting, moments of this imbricated process exist that are not visible in the (final) object, as each these moments become layered, covering and concealing the past. The entire process not easily/physically visible to the viewer – but experienced, enacted, and lived by the painter – and every layer is still felt, even if no longer visibly evident.

¹⁰⁹ Cixous, H. (1991) *Coming to Writing and Other Essays*. London: Harvard University Press, p137.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ I use the term 'studio' here to denote any site where making takes place, and similarly 'canvas' as any support or surface that is subject to that act of making. My notion of the contemporary studio is explored in Chapter Four: Sites of Experimentation.

¹¹² Again, making reference to Schor's' notion of *w/hole*, as explored earlier in this chapter.

Interlude

A painterly exploration of an uncertain process

I am yet to understand.

*There can be no calculated outcome,
this is the yet-to-be space of painting.*

*I make an embodied response to the surface,
the materials, my surroundings, my thinking,
tracing layers of chance,
feeling the marks made,
scraping, pushing, wiping, smearing,
until the paint finds its own path.*

*The activity becomes a dialogue,
a gentle movement back and forth,
a silent conversation
with an inner space of painting.*

*In this time of uncertainty,
I remain strangely calm.*

I continue to paint.

(Excerpt from Reflective Journal, November 2020.)

My first experiment in presencing took place very publicly at the PGR Studio Annual conference, *Beyond Borders*, held at Birmingham City University in 2017. The call for papers invited proposals for presentations and interventions that would destabilise and challenge the traditionally accepted presentation of the conference ‘paper’. Inspired and excited by this challenge, I embarked on a collaborative venture with Dan Auluk: our aim was to challenge the understanding of what constitutes ‘research’ within the often-rigid frameworks of academia, and to use this as an opportunity to transgress those boundaries and begin to seek out new and fertile pathways – to begin *presencing*.



Figure 28 Sally Bailey, fragment vi.

The outcomes of the experimentation performed at the conference were displayed and viewed as in an exhibition, but here they are to be understood as *epistemic things*,¹¹³ in a continuing process of evolving and revealing; they reflected a material moment in time, the beginnings of *presencing*. The archival documentation of this performance, [Becoming#1](#), now interrupts this chapter. The chapter will then conclude with an examination of the concept of becoming as shaped in the context of this research.

¹¹³ Rheinberger, H. (1997) *Towards a History of Epistemic Things*, Stanford University Press.

Becoming #1 Beyond Borders

Place: BCU PGR Studio Conference, Parkside, Birmingham.

Date: 7th July 2017.

Aims: Presentation and performance, *'restaging the liminal: a messy investigation of the permeable boundaries of contemporary painting'*.



Figure 29 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk, Conference performance, 2017.

Event:

My first experiment in *'presencing'* took place very publicly - at the 2017 Birmingham City University/ PGRStudio Conference, *Beyond Borders*.

The call for papers had asked for "workshops, happenings, and presentations that redefine the parameters of the traditional paper format, reflecting your research, methodologies, ways of articulation and everything in between..." I took this as permission to explore my

painting process through mess, play, intervention and performance; methods all far removed from a traditionally accepted conference approach.

My presentation, entitled “restaging the liminal: a messy investigation of the permeable boundaries of contemporary painting”, was based on an interdisciplinary project with Dan Auluk. The outcomes of the previous #Becoming¹¹⁴ were worked into this presentation, aiming to present an insight into my practice and research methods. Our collaborative works were shown in the exhibition space; a film accompanied the monologue and performance, and a 50m work on paper disrupted the liminal space of the atrium, forming a complete body of work within the conference setting.

An exposition within the exhibition.



Figure 30 Sally Bailey, *After Joan Jonas*, 2017. Emulsion on paper, 50m x 1.5m.

¹¹⁴These Becomings do not appear in chronological order, but in order of relevance to this discussion. The ‘previous’ Becoming referred to here, is [Becoming#3](#), to be found in Chapter Four: Sites of Experimentation. Becoming#3 documents the earlier residency that provided the source materials (thinking, questioning, making, and knowledges) for this conference performance.



Figure 31 Sally Bailey, *After Joan Jonas*, 2017. Emulsion on paper, 50m x 1.5m.

The launching of this work on paper felt ceremonial in its execution. It took four of us to lift and unroll it; the ritual of the unrolling had to be done slowly and evenly so as not to tear the paper. That something so monumental could also be so fragile and transitory seemed strangely appropriate. Within minutes the security guard arrived to halt the proceedings – we were (unknowingly) launching the monumental banner right over the Dean's office window on the floor below, and she was not amused. It felt serendipitous and added to the confusion already being caused. Dr Taylor argued quietly and politely that this was art, that this was research, that this was important. Yes, it was a controversial act, but not a dangerous one. And thus, a new temporary site for the hanging was negotiated, the liminal space once again designated with the transformative capacity of the strange painting. We had left our mark. We had claimed this space, however fleetingly. It seemed that something remarkable may have happened here.

Outcomes:

I had not considered how dramatically this conference performance could alter and shape the course of my research, and indeed my methodological approach. It led me to consider that perhaps, through further exploration, a new liminal methodology could be defined that would begin to address the ever-sticky questions around how mess, play and failure can contribute to notions of 'what' constitutes doctoral research in the arts. I envisage that this revised methodology would be one that could better accommodate the uncertainties and intangibility that underpins practice as research; a methodology that embraces the pursuit of 'meaning-making' through exploration and experimentation in all its forms.



Figure 32 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk, *Post-performance Reflection*. Photograph by Juan Pablo Vitteri, 2017.

A period of intense critical evaluation and reflection followed the performance and revealed a number of new pathways through my research, pathways that may otherwise have remained undiscovered. These pathways have not been easy to navigate, often pulling me in conflicting

directions – but this is important; to abandon these pathways for fear of failure and becoming even more ‘lost’, is to give up on the possibilities of discovering new terrains, new ways of working, and unimagined outcomes.

Where Painting Becomes

ecstasis

If the notion of presencing can be understood as an experiencing *through* process and towards transformation, I am re-positioning *becoming* as the resolution of that process; a resolution since it can never be the end as such. Even to consider the concept of becoming in terms of resolution could seem a paradoxical endeavour; since becoming is, by definition, always in process. However, I am positioning becoming as simultaneously process *and* outcome, and process *as* outcome. A central thread to this thesis is the becoming of painter *and* of painting, which I am framing as the transubstantive potential within the 'space of exchange', existing within the liminal. The 'space of exchange' enables and captures the forces at play, and a transformation (or transference of those energies) occurs. This point of transformation is the *becoming* of painting, the alchemical forces rendered visible through the action of the painter within this process.

I consider becoming as being akin to the Aristotelian notion of poesis,¹¹⁵ in that becoming is a physical and psychical process whereby the painter *brings something into being which did not exist before*. But this 'outcome' is not 'resolved' (to use traditional rhetoric) but is, at this juncture, (in)visible;¹¹⁶ nonetheless, a painting has the *potential* to be created in the moment of becoming. Heidegger wrote of poesis as a liminal act, a threshold occasion; a moment of "ecstasis"¹¹⁷ when something becomes another, illustrated with the analogy of the butterfly emerging from the cocoon. This definition resonates well with my notion of becoming also.

I also draw here on the philosophy of Deleuze when considering the concept of becoming in relation to the painting process. Deleuze refers to becoming as a point of intervention; it is *of being*, but not tied to the present or any fixed point in space or time. Indeed, Deleuze writes of becoming:

It eludes the present; becoming does not tolerate the separation or the distinction of before and after, or of past and future. It pertains to the essence of becoming to move and to pull in both directions at once. Good sense affirms that in all things there is a determinable 'sens' or direction; but the paradox is the affirmation of both senses and directions at the same time.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Sinclair, M. (2006) *Heidegger, Aristotle and The Work of Art: Poiesis in Being*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p66.

¹¹⁶ The notion of the (in)visible was put forward in the Introduction. Existing within the liminal, it is neither process nor object, but is part of the journey between. It exists where the opposite states of invisible and visible oscillate, and hovers as the (in)visible wherein the transformative potentials exist.

¹¹⁷ Sinclair, M. (2006) *Heidegger, Aristotle and The Work of Art: Poiesis in Being*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p131.

¹¹⁸ Deleuze, G. (2015) *The Logic of Sense*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p3.

This fluidity of the temporal is an important quality of this process; becoming thus could be argued to re/present the reaching of an endpoint which, paradoxically, could also be the discovery of another beginning. Becoming offers a new dimension of multiplicity and of complex simultaneity when this point of transformation is breached. The constant oscillation of past and future states of being results in a state of constant shifting, movement and transformation.

assemblage

Deleuze refers to Becoming as moments of change: one moment is drawn into another, into an 'assemblage'.¹¹⁹ He considers the book to be a prime example of an assemblage, both in terms of its physical form and presence, and in terms of the function of the assemblage.¹²⁰ This understanding of the assemblage relates also to this thesis, in that whilst it is largely presented in a linear form, it has not been dreamt, composed or written in that way, and it follows that I do not envisage that it is mandatory to read it in that way either. As a strategy for readability, I advocate that the reader approaches this as a text to dip in and out of; it is a collection of writings that can fulfil different functions at different times, dependant on circumstance, need and mood, and reflects the circularity of thinking contained within.

Offering the notion of assemblage as a multiplicity, an organism, a 'space of exchange'. Deleuze goes on to elaborate:

In Becoming, one part of the assemblage is drawn into the territory of another piece, changing its value as an element and bringing about a new unity...Becoming is a process of change, flight or movement within the assemblage.....Becoming is not a process of imitation or analogy, it is generative of a new way of being that is a function of influences rather than resemblances.¹²¹

This thesis argues that Becoming expands this concept of the assemblage to include the point of transformation of the painter, and of painting to Painting as re/presenting the outcomes that are generated. I put forward that this process happens in two distinct phases; firstly, there is the *process* of becoming which exists purely as the *movement towards* the outcome. This is then superseded by the *transition into* a state of being – and it is this second transitional space I choose to call be(com)ing,¹²² since it represents the moment of *coming into* Being. This moment of be(com)ing

¹¹⁹ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2013) *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p2-4

¹²⁰ Ibid. p2

¹²¹ Ibid, p4.

¹²² I claim this term for my lexicon of expanded painterly language, which will be found in the concluding chapter, The Ambix.

absorbs and transforms the forces of time and the temporal within the process of painting, to be reimagined as an external presence in the visible, 'real' world.

It is necessary for me to differentiate these two phases of the process, since as a painter I understand only too well that to reach a space/place of 'becoming' does not guarantee the passage into a state of be(com)ing or Being, where painter and painting emerge as separate entities, and distinct from the process that has enabled that transubstantive moment to occur. For painting (verb) does not always lead to Painting (object).

The following diagram (figure 14) charts this uncertain process from Presencing through to Being, acknowledging that at any given point along this trajectory there is always the ever-present risk of failure and uncertainty of outcome.



Figure 33 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Towards Being)*, 2021. Gouache pen on A4 watercolour paper.

This notion of be(com)ing is beautifully elucidated by Barbara Bolt, writing of her own experience as a painter, and the realisation of the pure instant where painting ‘takes on a life of its own’:

...I want to recall the process of painting. At first the work proceeded according to established principles of painting practice...However, at some undefinable moment, the painting took on a life that seemed to have nothing to do with my conscious attempts to control it. The “work” (as verb) took on its own momentum, its own rhythm...the painting takes on a life of its own. It breathes, vibrates, pulsates, shimmers, and generally runs away from me...life gets into the image.¹²³

Here Bolt articulates what is felt and intuited by the painter at that very point of what I am proposing as be(com)ing. This instant, Bolt’s ‘undefinable moment’, cannot be presumed, constructed, replicated, or recorded; it exists only in the realm of the experiential. Through process the painter moves towards this transformative instant, within the ‘space of exchange’, and the possibility of the be(com)ing of painting.

potentials

This space of be(com)ing operates in a space/place between time and event, as does the liminal. I am positioning be(com)ing as a liminal event; it is a force of potential that lives in the interstices, the ‘terrains vague’¹²⁴ of the between-spaces that process traverses. But this space/place of be(com)ing cannot be mapped, it cannot be found – it exists as the essence of a place that is felt and experienced. Be(com)ing is not a linear concept and cannot be defined by the points (temporal or otherwise) that it connects. Deleuze uses the example of the difference between memory and becoming to illustrate the shape of becoming; memory is explained as a straight line between two fixed points in time, a line that connects then and now, whilst becoming (akin to my notion of be(com)ing):

...on the contrary, it passes between points, it comes up through the middle, it runs perpendicular to the points first perceived, transversely to the localizable relation to the distant or contiguous points. A point is always a point of origin. But a line of becoming has neither beginning nor end, departure nor arrival, origin nor destination.... A line of becoming has only a middle.¹²⁵

Any notion, therefore, of a defined ‘place’ of becoming is swept away; like a small leaf in the breeze, the current of air - felt, but not seen – buffets the leaf this way and that, tumbling and swirling, until it comes to rest in a place that could not have been predicted.

Elizabeth Grosz also recognises the complexity of understanding the concept of becoming in relation to a linear model of temporality. Grosz positions Becoming as incorporating “futures unthought”,¹²⁶

¹²³ Bolt, B. (2004) *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. London: I.B. Tauris, p1.

¹²⁴ Schor, M. (1997) *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. London: Duke University Press, p155.

¹²⁵ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2013) *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p323.

¹²⁶ Grosz, E. ed. (1999) *Becomings: Explorations in Time, Memory, and Futures*. New York: Cornell University Press, p15.

in as much as Becoming represents a process of moving *towards* a future destination, or outcome, but one that we cannot yet know. The ‘unknowing’ in becoming is critical to my own definition of be(com)ing, which is dependent on the painter recognising and accepting the uncertainties encountered – chance, risk and failure are all an inevitable possibility of the painting process. Grosz writes:

Time is that which disappears as such in order to make appearance, all appearance and disappearance, that is, events possible. Its disappearance is twofold: it disappears into events, processes, movements, things, as the mode of their becoming...it suffers, or produces a double displacement: from becoming to being, and from temporal to spatial.¹²⁷



Figure 34 Sally Bailey, fragment vii.

Jim Mooney, artist and academic, has also shared his thoughts on the process of becoming-painting, highlighting that all painters experience this transformational moment at some points in their practice, and that it is something truly magical and perhaps beyond understanding outside of that moment.¹²⁸ Mooney searches for analogies to explain this process to the uninitiated, and talks of it in

¹²⁷ Ibid. p2

¹²⁸ Mooney, J. Painting: Poignancy and Ethics. In: MacLeod, K. & Holdridge, L. eds. (2006) *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*. London: Routledge, p140.

terms of shedding one's skin to reveal the new underneath,¹²⁹ perhaps pointing in the direction of a metaphorical rebirth or re-waking:

...the painter requires an abrasive resistance from the world in order that he or she can shed their skins in the form of the works they produce. Some skins are easily shed, others put up greater resistance. After each shedding we set to work on the new...there are moments in time when the surface of the body and the surface of the work elide, become one, and what is tattooed on the surface of the work is simultaneously being inscribed on the surface of the body. In this way a work of art emerges, and we too are changed; in a very important sense, art becomes us.¹³⁰

This passage eloquently voices the notion that whilst the painter and Painting, once merged as one and the same entity within the process, emerge separated. And yet the Painting is still *of* the painter, since part of the painter has been shed in order to give the Painting being¹³¹.

endpoints

Let us consider the endpoint of this process of painting; the journey is complete, the 'space of exchange' has been reached, the potentials within unleashed, and a point of be(com)ing revealed. The outcome is the Painting as object, as artefact; removed from the process and now separate, detached from the painter. But the Painting is not dispossessed of the forces that enabled its creation, for those forces have been absorbed and transposed, rendering the Painting as document of both presencing and be(com)ing.

The Painting exists as residue, as an imprint of the 'moment' in becoming-painting. This moment is simultaneously endpoint and beginning, for it also offers the potential of new thresholds to be transgressed. It is not an impossibility that to become, to come into Being, can also represent another beginning.

*"Nothing is, all becomes."*¹³²

¹²⁹ Ibid, p141.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p142.

¹³¹ Throughout this thesis, I have chosen to differentiate between painting-as-process and painting-as-object by capitalising the latter noun form. Thus 'painting' refers to process, and 'Painting' refers to object.

¹³² Césaire, A. (2011) *A Tempest*. Trans. Crispin, P. London: Oberon press, p26. These words are spoken by the character Ariel, Act I Scene II.

Conclusions

(perhaps)

Perhaps painting is no longer medium-specific, it is no longer confined to the constraints of two-dimensional production methods. It is not a static practice, nor static conceptually. It is not prescriptive, nor hierarchical. It is no longer concerned primarily with imitation and mimesis.

Perhaps painting could be multi-dimensional, interdisciplinary, or conceptually polyvalent. It could be experimental, ephemeral, or (in)visible. Painting could be imagined, danced, or spoken. Painting could be any of these things, or equally none of them. Painting today, could be anything we want it to be.

Perhaps what painting is, in the context of this research, is evolving, a journey, a vision. Painting is an experiential and embodied process; it is an experience that is perhaps more felt than seen, emotive on a level that is unsurpassed. It is a processor for whatever is already known and accepted, and a conduit between the inner vision of the painter and the outer world of the audience. It is a site of knowledge generation and exchange. Painting, above all, communicates. Painting lives and operates in the gap between what language is able to describe, convey or signify, and the actuality of the event. Painting operates as its own language, 'beyond' normative language, allowing a hyper-articulation of the 'unsayable'.

What is painting?

a model for knowledge

a space of exchange

a conduit

a language system

a site of Be(com)ing



Figure 35 Sally Bailey, fragment viii.

"The circle draws to a close. The metaphorical journey turns out to be a circular project: the movement of one going out from itself in order to return itself and so affirm itself, the same".

Yve Lomax, *Writing the Image* (2000)

Chapter Three – Towards a Liminal Method/ology

“A creator who isn’t seized by the throat by a set of impossibilities is no creator. A creator is someone who creates his own impossibilities, and therefore creates possibilities. It’s by banging your head against the wall that you will find an answer.”

Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations* (1990)

Artful Ways of Knowing

chaos

This chapter will consider the position of the contemporary artist-researcher, and the complexities faced when pursuing and practicing what Carole Gray and Ian Pirie name ‘research at the edge of chaos’;¹³³ that art-based research inhabits a precarious position, one that at any moment could turn from a space of validity into one of unrecoverable chaos, which resonates with this research in examining liminality. The realm of art-based research, and more specifically *practice* as research, is without doubt a turbulent place, one in a constant state of flux and transformation and often at odds with the more rigid requirements and conventions of academia. These tensions might be felt most acutely by the artist-researcher when considering *how* their research could be conducted, devising a tailored methodology that will deliver the imagined outcomes, and assembling the strategies that this methodology will contain. The contemporary artist-researcher may indeed feel that often their research process does precariously balance on the brink of chaos. To wilfully seek out a position of chaos is surely a path fraught with danger – for it represents an unpredictable, contradictory, destabilising place, unmanageable and unremitting. But it is important to also consider that these same characteristics are also those that create the conditions required for change and transformation, allowing a space between for new thinking, for doing, and for new knowledges to emerge.

I argue that the liminal is positioned within and across this realm of chaos; and from this place the artist-researcher is able to build a metaphorical bridge (through the ‘space of exchange’) to overlap and refold this territory in order to achieve transformation.

a seat at the table

Nothing in the intertwined worlds of art and research remains static, and it is useful to acknowledge this.¹³⁴ Since the 1980’s far greater academic recognition has been afforded to art practice *as* research, through the writings of Robin Nelson, Christopher Frayling and Carole Gray amongst others, with a marked change in emphasis from research *about*, to research *through* in contemporary discourse on creative arts enquiry; research through doing and handling, and most importantly reflecting in and on those actions. No longer bound by the rigid empirical methodological frameworks inherited from

¹³³ Gray, C. & Pirie, I. (1995) *Artistic Research Procedure: Research at the Edge of Chaos*. London: University of Salford Press.

¹³⁴ Graw, I. and Lajer-Burcharth E. (2016) *Painting Beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-medium Condition*. Berlin: Sternberg Press, p12.

science-based research, today's artist-researchers are now able to define the terms of their own research and present it as such. To a point.

And it is at (and because of) this point, that I have re/imagined my own methodological approach to this research. In order to seek out and inhabit a liminal space within the inner world of painting, and to locate and define a 'space of exchange' therein, it seemed logical that my strategies used to achieve this should echo the very characteristics of those spaces that so intrigued me. This strategy I define as a 'Liminal Methodology' and name it as such. This methodology, I argue, can better navigate the 'between' spaces of research; the slippery areas that are difficult to grasp, and realise the vast potentials that reside there. This methodology has no fixed shape, no rigid structure. There are no hard edges, nor any fixed rules; there are instead permeable parameters, which can identify this system of research as a methodology. It is unapologetically messy, playful, porous, fluid, shape-shifting and unpredictable (figure 15). This methodology, like my practice, will focus on the *processes* of painting practice over expected outcomes, quantifiable data, or knowledge production; redefining the 'shape' of research and methodologies of research to allow for the processes of practice to be given due consideration.

I take my seat at the table.

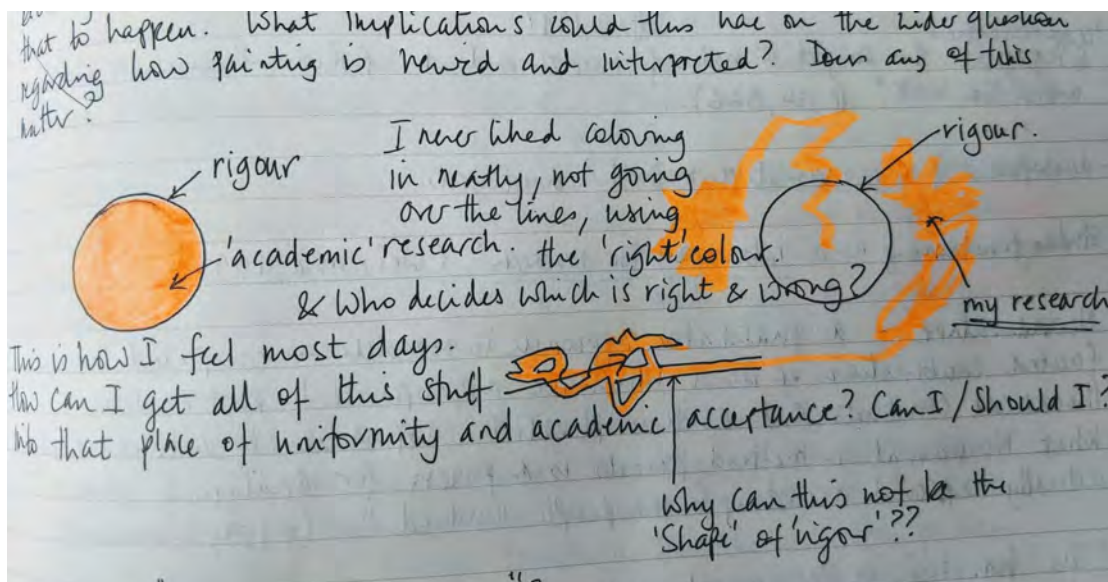


Figure 36 Sally Bailey, Excerpt from Reflective Journal, 2017.

Examining the extant literature surrounding recent innovations in the field of Practice as Research (PaR), and the new methodological approaches to it, is important to provide a robust framework for my own construction of a liminal methodology, in the context of this research project as art-based research, that can in turn offer ways to define, comprehend and articulate those ideas and practices connected with this 'space of exchange'.

Henk Slager, writer and academic, examines why art-based research does not sit comfortably with traditional academic approaches to method, and concludes that is the diverse nature of art-based research and its relationship with 'material thinking'¹³⁵ that demands a more flexible approach, and more imaginative solutions. He writes:

artistic research cannot be comprised in well-defined modules, structured units and other limiting concepts. Artistic thinking as a form of pure rhizomatic thought separates artistic research from arborescent and sedentary conceptions of knowledge, from judgemental positions functioning as nodal points of academic science and replaces it with a fluent, nomadic, deterritorialising movement.¹³⁶

The notion of 'rhizomatic thought' as applied to artistic research is an interesting one; it gives affirmation to a non-linear approach and describes something able to spread in multiple directions at the same time, something underground and inherently invasive. The concept of the rhizome is also of particular pertinence to my own developing liminal methodology which is best described as a rhizomatic entanglement of fragments, conversations, experiments and interludes between and across. I have approached my research practice as would a rapidly spreading plant, sending out new root systems in multiple directions in the hope that some at least will find a fertile place to develop and grow. This is where my research and its thinking reside, amongst these unseen underground connections, trying to make sense of the tangle before reaching up to the surface.

Kim Vincs, a leading academic and writer in the creative arts, discusses the possibility of dance practice being used as the sole methodology in dance research in her essay *Rhizome/MyZone: A case study in studio-based dance research*.¹³⁷ Fundamental to her argument for this case, is the notion that dance is able to shift from:

¹³⁵ The origins of this term are attributable to Paul Carter, whose work is discussed shortly.

¹³⁶ Slager, H. (2011) *The Pleasure of Research*. Helsinki: Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, p43.

¹³⁷ Vincs, K. *Rhizome/MyZone: A case study in studio-based dance research*. In E. Barrett and B. Bolt, eds. (2010) *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, pp99-112.

...dance as an object of investigation, to dance as a means of investigation...rather than dances being the outcomes of thinking done previously, dances are the actual process of thinking, and this process is the core methodology of studio-based dance research.¹³⁸

My own thinking is aligned with Vincs; the words *dance* and *painting* being interchangeable, this statement offers the underlying truth of how art-based research could be best understood. Similarly, I put forward that the notion of the performative is also fundamental to considering how the encountering of painting can be better approached; a notion that is explored in Chapter Six.

My methodology also draws on the writing of Stephan Dilleuth, artist and academic, who identifies a form of research he describes as “Bohemian Research”.¹³⁹ This is a research process he describes as “an open-ended, improvised form of self-organised research focused on the not-yet-known”,¹⁴⁰ an off-centre approach that I again affiliate myself with. For a bohemian approach requires a leap of faith, a move from the known to the unknown; the antithesis of a science-based approach. As a painter, I set out on a journey – does it matter if I don’t know where I am going until I get there? It requires an element of letting go. It is in such locations that I identify a need for the liminal methodological approach that I advocate here; imaginative strategies, and new ways of thinking, are essential in order to unfold research possibilities of this manner – and the more imaginative the better.

There can be no ‘one size fits all’ approach to arts-based research – practice doesn’t work like that, so neither can a fit with theory be presumed. As Dilleuth articulated, the open-endedness, the improvised, the focus on the not-yet-known are all important characteristics – and so too is flexibility. The methodology that works for me in this project may need adapting for the next – by utilising that flexibility. However, here I share my current modes of investigation and evaluation, by way of an excerpt from my journals reflecting on the methodological strategies that I consider. Following the Interlude, a number of the more prominent strategies will be examined.

¹³⁸ Vincs, K. Rhizome/MyZone: A case study in studio-based dance research. In E. Barrett and B. Bolt, eds., *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry*. London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd (2010), p100.

¹³⁹ Dilleuth, S. (2012) *Secession: The Academy and the Corporate Public*. Berlin: Revolver Publishing, p230.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p231.

Interlude

My liminal methodology might include:

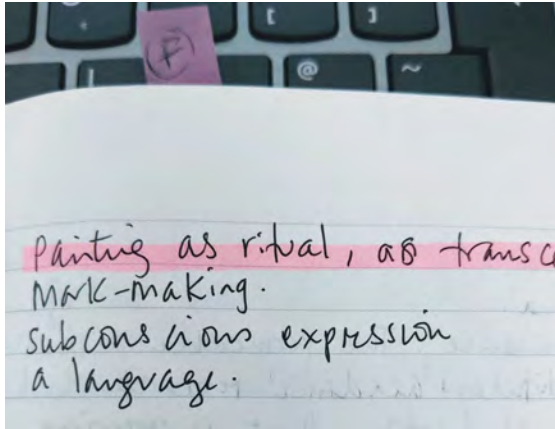


Figure 37 Sally Bailey, Excerpt from Reflective Journal, 2017.

This is not an exhaustive list, and neither is it one that I shall explain fully. Some of these strategies will be explored in this chapter. Some will be introduced shortly – collaboration and conversation in Chapter Five, performance and performativity in Chapter Six. This myriad presentation of strategies are not practised individually – their strength lies in the imbricated practising of different combinations for different situations – an alchemical approach to a liminal method perhaps.

painting
self-reflection
observation
sketchbooks
reflective journals
writing
mapping
performance
photographic
documentation
archiving
repurposing
material
the immaterial
conversation
exhibition
exposition
more painting
not painting
re-painting
experimentation
fictioning and narration
play and mess
failure and risk
collaboration
object-making

and everything in/between.

It is through painting that I learn about painting.

I perform it. I become it.

When research strategies are extracted and nurtured from within the processes and practices of the artist-researcher, experiential and embodied methodologies can evolve. This evolution is put forward by Paul Carter as “material thinking”.¹⁴¹ Building on the writings of Barbara Bolt, who argues that art theory has “missed the opportunity to develop a logic of art practice”¹⁴² by failing to consider material practice and thinking, Carter identifies an “intellectual adventure”¹⁴³ that he claims is unique to the process of making:

Critics and theorists interested in communicating ideas about things cannot emulate it. They remain outsiders, interpreters on the side-lines, usually trying to make sense of a creative process afterwards, based purely on the outcome. They lack access to the process and, more fundamentally, they lack the vocabulary to explicate its intellectual character.¹⁴⁴

He puts forward that the “matrix of production”¹⁴⁵ is where thinking happens, and where meaning (or knowledge) is deemed to reside. He writes scathingly on the lingering expectation that arts-based researchers must translate their ‘material thinking’ into words in order to be validated.¹⁴⁶ He likens the process to game-playing, a knowing of the ‘rules’ and adjusting your game to fit;¹⁴⁷ sadly, this approach can only serve to diminish the original intention of the artist, and brings both sides to a place where there can be no winners. He writes:

Increasingly painters find that their professional advancement is dependent on being able to put into words what they do or have done...they have little alternative but to master the rhetorical game of theorising what they do. It is a vain, often humiliating exercise...because the rules of the interpretive game deny intellectual recognition to those elements of material thinking that define its distinctive reach as creative research.¹⁴⁸

And hence this research seeks to (re)establish the primacy of process, of thinking through the material/immaterial, in order to establish the ‘logic of art practice’ that Bolt mourned.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴¹ Carter, P. (2004) *Material Thinking*. Australia: Melbourne University Press.

¹⁴² Bolt, B. (2010) *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. London: I.B. Tauris, p7.

¹⁴³ Carter, P. *Material Thinking*. Australia: Melbourne University Press (2004), p18

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid*, p xi

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p xii

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid*, p xiii

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p xiii

¹⁴⁹ Bolt, B. (2010) *Art Beyond Representation: The Performative Power of the Image*. London: I.B. Tauris, p7.

Tim Ingold sums up the relationship of material, thinking and knowing eloquently:

These materials think in us, as we think through them. Here, every work is an experiment: not in the natural scientific sense of testing a preconceived hypothesis, or of engineering a confrontation between ideas 'in the head' and facts 'on the ground', but in the sense of prising an opening and following where it leads.¹⁵⁰

And thus, my methodology (as a painter) will always begin with thinking in and through the materials of my practice; materialness as a mode of unfolding potential, a portal, a space through which to begin presencing.

For it is through painting that I learn about painting.

I perform it. I become it.

¹⁵⁰ Ingold, T. (2013) *Making*, London: Routledge, p6.

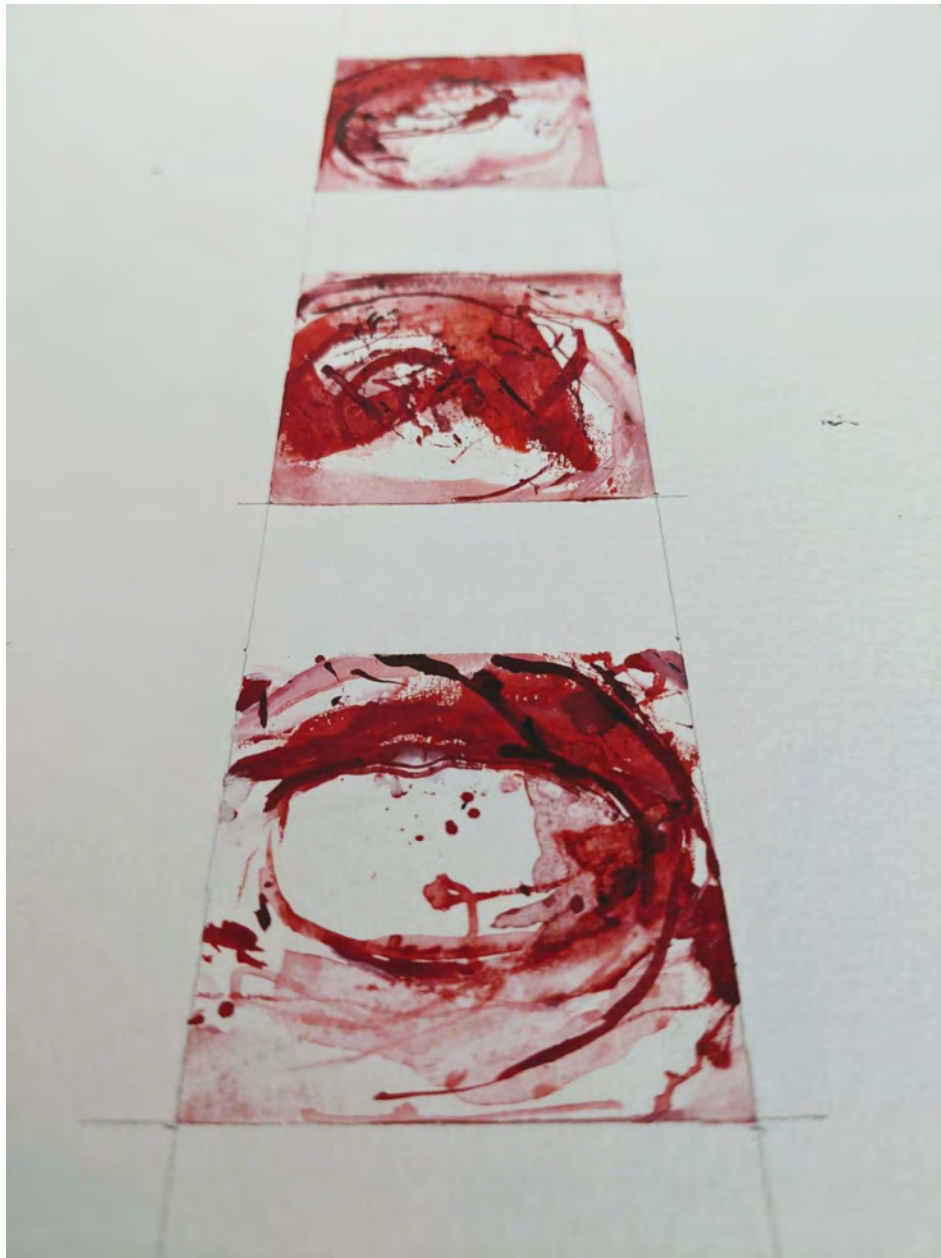


Figure 38 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (process)*, gouache on A4 watercolour paper, 2021.

Layers of the process exist that are no longer visible in the painting, each layer covers and conceals the past. You are looking at the now-ness of Painting. But whilst the process is not physically visible to the viewer, it has been experienced, enacted and lived by the painter. Every layer is still *felt*, even if no trace of it remains.

These small gestures are the evidence of material thinking. I am bodily engaged with my process; this enhanced immersion in process providing an entry point to the liminal, to the space of exchange. Body, mind, material, support, tools – they become a single entity.

'Mapping' is a term widely used across multiple research disciplines, and it is necessary to distinguish the 'mapping' that I engage in, distinct from those of information and data analysis, or the painful past-time of mind-mapping, a tedious exercise used by the unimaginative in the hope of generating new ideas using collective brainpower.¹⁵¹ The mapping strategy that I employ is one widely used in creative practices,¹⁵² and here I position it as a critical tool in my methodological armoury. It affords a quiet and reflective place to think through my research materially and visually, and most importantly, multi-dimensionally. I seek to better understand my own internal dialogue through the visible and physical articulation of it. As a method, it proves extremely useful in enabling me to visualise the various strands of my investigations and experiments and envisaging how these threads of that research and practice could be drawn together.

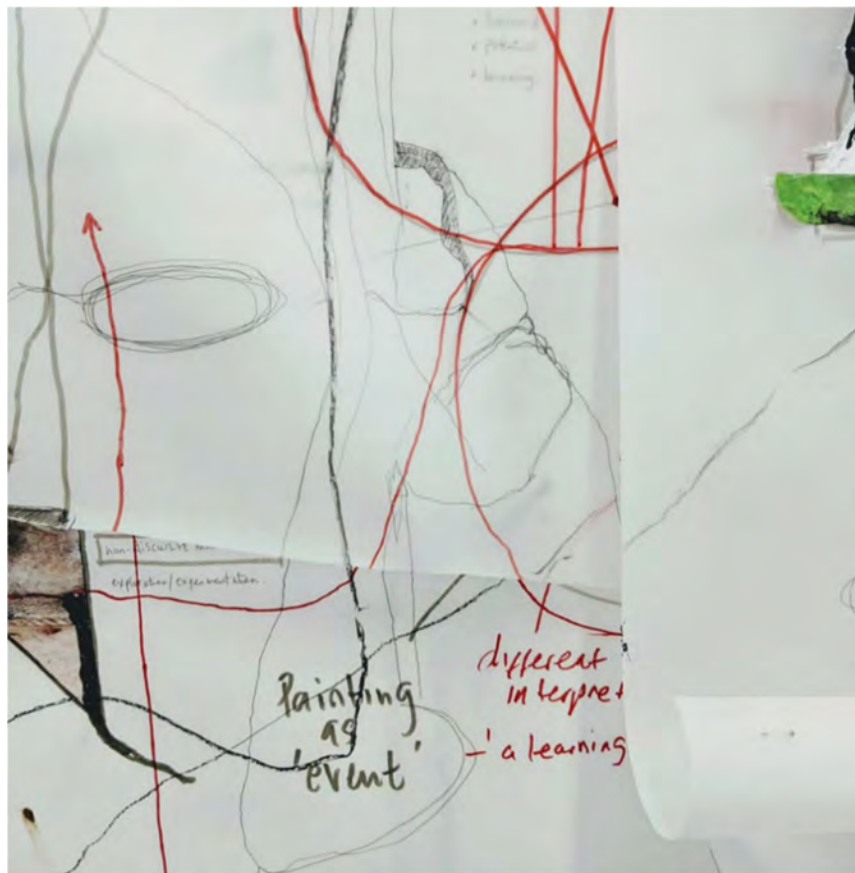


Figure 39 Sally Bailey, *Mapping* (installation detail), 2019.

¹⁵¹ As the reader may correctly assume, I have never been a fan of mind-maps. Perhaps my description is a little harsh, but I will reflect on that at a later point.

¹⁵² Gray, C. & Malins, J. (2004) *Visualising Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, p47.

Recognising the importance of mapping to my practice and research, I undertook a five-week residency with the sole intention of unravelling the many questions that continued to perplex me and evade any attempts at sense-making. The process of this thinking manifested itself in many forms – as writing, as painting, as mark-making, as assemblage, as a complex layering of thinking; it involved mess, play and failure, conversations, and inward reflections. As the mapping evolved over time, the overlaps and foggy areas alike revealed themselves, and coherent pathways between began to emerge (figures 18, 19).

Like my methodology, this process of mapping is evolving and experimental; it will not produce a 'map', in that it cannot direct you to a pre-known destination. It charts places as-yet-unknown, it documents a direction, and seeks out connections. And like the rhizomic trajectories of my practice, the direction this mapping details is not a singular event, for this 'direction' too is multi-faceted and operates on many levels simultaneously.



Figure 40 Sally Bailey, *Mapping* (installation detail), 2019.

The techniques of mapping are invaluable in that they allow a complex web of ideas to be visualised in a way that writing alone cannot convey. For the artist, it provides the ability to consider the inter-relationship of different streams of thinking, and to bring these threads together into a cohesive and functioning pattern. As a map, albeit one with blurred edges, ideas can be developed freely and organically – there are no rules here about required outcomes, since the activity of the mapping is the outcome in itself. I find myself contemplating what this large-scale and immersive mapping event can bring to the table that mapping in a research journal, on a scrap of paper, or an iPad, cannot? I conclude that it is to do with the scale of the activity, such that the artist-researcher is physically required to move *within* the evolving surfaces and spaces between, within the research, literally a mobilisation of thinking and ideas; it is performative in this sense. It is perhaps the equivalent also of ‘reading out loud’; you hear and think differently as you tune into the sound of your own voice, you are other to yourself, and perceptions are heightened, thinking is freed from the interconnectedness of mundane thought. These forces within the process are quickly absorbed into the potentials that the map holds.

At the end of the residency, the complete artefact was gathered and preserved; I will revisit it periodically, for it is something that can never be declared finished. The documentation of the event is presented here (interrupting the chapter), as [Becoming#2](#). The exploration of my methodological strategies will continue thereafter.

Becoming #2 Mapping

Place: Painting Studio, Birmingham School of Art.

Date: 5th Nov – 7th Dec 2018.

Aims: To work through my research visually, materially, and multi-dimensionally, producing a mapping of thought and activity. To better understand how my practice fits within the wider PhD project.



Figure 41 Sally Bailey, *Mapping*, Studio installation, 2018.

Event:

I took the opportunity to work for a period of five weeks in a studio space at the School of Art. Being away from the familiarity and expectedness of my own studio-space enabled me to map through my research and practice in a very focused and, arguably, more objective manner. I took only a limited number of materials into the space and

had no preconceived ideas as to the shape that this ‘mapping’ would take, other than to confront and be confronted by my research questions and praxical knowledge gained through previous #Becomings.

I began working on two distinctly separate areas, firstly with text – laying out the threads of my research, concepts that were interesting to me, words that resonated.

Links began to form.

Alongside this I began to paint, fragments of the female form, and more abstracted interludes. I think best when I paint; this is my process.

After a time, the two paths merged. Working on translucent paper enabled the layering of thought and image, each new layer being informed by that underneath, and in turn informing the next.

This exercise started out as a necessarily individual experiment, as I sought to better understand my own internal dialogue, but as the project progressed a number of participants were invited into the space to work, talk, and make alongside me. Our conversations were recorded, and the making-dialogue transcribed. More importantly, as well as recording the sound, and recording those sounds as text, we also used paint to act as an imprint of those conversations. The resulting mapped art ‘work’ is messy, noisy, complicated, yet nuanced.

Outcomes:

This period of thinking was pivotal to the momentum of this research project. It afforded me time to think “out loud” – both literally (through making-dialogues), and metaphorically (in terms of visualising and textualising my process).

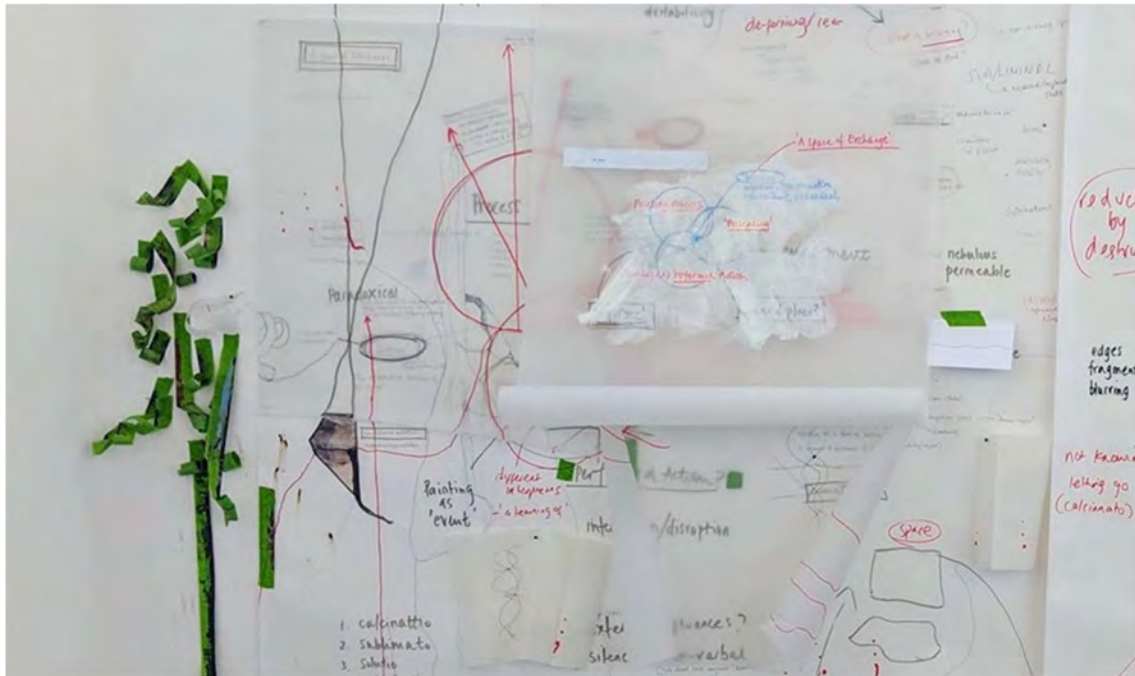


Figure 42 Sally Bailey, *Mapping*, Studio installation, 2018.

Interestingly, working primarily on translucent paper and layering the fragments of thinking and making, allowing them to find their own form, helped a formed and tangible framework to reveal itself. This was a framework for research that I had been struggling hard to pin down, and even harder to verbalise or contextualise.

Finally, I began to understand that *this was my method*; a method/ology that I must refine and pursue. It is a thing of curiousness, playfulness, inhibition, risk-taking, mess and experimentation. It will find the interstices between more established methodologies, and furrow its way in, disrupting and destabilising from the roots up. For this method/ology comes from within. It will continue to re/shape this 'space of exchange'; a place where new thinking, new knowledge, and new ways of doing and seeing will emerge.



Figure 43 Sally Bailey, *Mapping* (detail), 2018.

Artful Ways of Knowing continued...

writing

The place for, and function of, writing within current arts-based research remains a thorny issue,¹⁵³ and one that may remain unresolved for some time. Traditionally within academia, the written thesis was the only expected way in which to present research.¹⁵⁴ This exegesis was expected to conform to a specified uniformity of structure and content, any deviation was not encouraged. But as the 'old' world of the academy began to accept arts-based researchers to the table, it became apparent that a more colourful approach might need to be considered. As already said, progress has been slow, and we are still far from the ideal that Graham Sullivan outlines, where practice *is* research, and the art object alone stands as new knowledge:

The research consists entirely of the creative practice, with no explicit critical exegesis deemed necessary: the creative artefact is considered the embodiment of the new knowledge, emphasis is placed on the exploration and innovation in the given artistic practice.¹⁵⁵

The wholehearted academic acceptance of this notion is still some way off. Whilst I do concur (as a practicing artist) that art practice is capable of conveying so much more than, or at least the equivalent of any verbal or written communication, it still requires the viewer or recipient of that communication to have some understanding of the language of practice, and empathy with the dialectical challenges of arts-based research and its methods. My position here is one aligned with G. James Daichendt, who considers the relationship the artist has with writing thus:

The artist is the catalyst that brings together the media, and it is through the writing process that the artist-scholar is able to connect the dots and reflect upon the artistic process.¹⁵⁶

This is an important observation for the reluctant artist when facing the task of writing *about* her research, rather than simply presenting their practice as that research; writing can serve to make art practice more readily accessible, to be supplementary to the process, and to bring the reader closer to the inner world of painting. Writing cannot, and should not, replace making, but the gesture of

¹⁵³ ...if the practice is considered to 'be' the research, should it not logically follow that the submission be the artwork or art-work that comes from that activity?

¹⁵⁴ Nelson, R. (2013) *Practice As Research in the Arts: Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p101.

¹⁵⁵ Sullivan, G. Making Space: The Purpose and Place of Practice-Led Research. In: H. Smith and R.T. Dean, eds., *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press (2009), pp41-65.

¹⁵⁶ Daichendt, G.J. (2012) *Artist Scholar: Reflections on Writing as Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, p47.

writing is one that I argue is a useful companion tool - one of inquiry, interpretation and communication.

My painting practice is multi-faceted; painting process, painterly language, painting experiments, painting collaboration, painting as performative action, painting as writing and writing like a painter – all of these approaches must work alongside, and be imbricated with, more conventional methods of presenting research. For now.

But writing can take many forms and I argue that it is an indispensable tool for the artist-researcher; as a method for communicating thinking, for analysis, for creating a space within research to explore. I am a painter, but I also consider myself a writer – this has not always been so. At the outset of this journey my writing was very private, and I shared it with no-one. It afforded a quiet space to be alone with my thinking, to construct narratives around my experiences, and to reflect. The notion of ‘academic writing’ terrified me; I did not believe I had the language to offer this form of writing, let alone the ability to communicate that language effectively. My writing was simply *my writing*, it helped me to ‘see’, and make sense of my thinking; it was not ready for an audience.

My writing manifests itself in many guises, as outlined earlier in this chapter – and each strand serves its own purpose. My reflective journal (which I consider one of most important research methods) has been a constant companion, documenting a record of my journey back and forth. It contains copious notes, random ideas, cathartic passages of sketching, tangled diagrams, many tears, and the occasional shopping list. In short, the past six years are recorded in these rather worn pages; I look back through the volumes frequently, and always find something new, something I had jotted down and left there to be uncovered at a later date, at a time when I was able to make sense of it after all. These are precious artefacts.

I write in my sketchbooks – a different kind of writing, a practical analysis to accompany my random scribbling as I grapple with new ideas for painting. I write little stories to myself on my laptop; my strategies for procrastination far outnumber those of my methodology. I write lists of titles for paintings that I may never paint. I keep a notebook of words that excite me, carefully stored until I find a space to sprinkle them. I write important ‘don’t forget’ notes on my hand, and always regret it when it comes to scrubbing them clean later.

I have never considered that thinking/making/writing are separate endeavours, for these activities happen concurrently, they inform each other, and form a singular process. As a painter, I cannot imagine my practice without words. And so, I do not consider writing (and writing-as-exegesis) as a metaphorical spanner in my methodological toolbox, but instead regard it as a painter views her paintbrush – as a connector between mind, matter, process and outcome.

My liminal methodology also includes art-writing, a form of wordsmithing very distinct from the writing for research exegesis. My interpretation of this process is drawn from the work of two writers. Katie McLeod puts forward the notion of 'Art/Writing', which explores a theoretical synthesis of the practices of writing and art production, resulting in a unique hybrid method of communicating ideas, processes and outcomes.¹⁵⁷ Similarly, Yve Lomax considers the act of art writing as an act of artmaking in itself; Lomax regards there to be no physical or theoretical division between art practice and art theory.¹⁵⁸ This position allows the artist-writer to 'show', as performative gesture, the holistic nature of their practice and enables the reader to 'see' those connections.

I suggest that the practice of art-writing allows the artist-researcher to experiment and position her inquiry in the between spaces of practice and theory, and to bring a heightened level of creativity and curiousness to the writing process. My art-writing sits within and around my painting practice. It addresses the materiality of the process of making by rendering a physicality and visibility to the unseen processes; it articulates and illuminates. Equally important, I regard that art-writing is able to challenge, to question and to destabilise thinking, since it is not beholden to the defined and unforgiving parameters of traditional modes of academic writing; it can be playful, eschewing an adherence to notions of narration, description, exposition, and argument.

Art-writing is a porous encounter and has afforded me a safer path into writing; it enabled me to explore writing as narrative, storytelling, fictioning and poetry. Small examples of my art-writing are included throughout this thesis, positioned as Interludes; taken from my reflective journals they document small moments in time, as I struggle to make sense of the world. My art-writing comes from my thinking, and it is through that act of thinking that art-writing can bring clarity.

¹⁵⁷MacLeod, K. (2007) Conference paper: *A Singular Encounter With Art Theorisation: A Speculation Concerning Art/Writing in the Context of Doctoral Research*. University of Dundee.

¹⁵⁸Lomax, Y. (2000) *Writing the Image: An Adventure with Art and Theory*. London: I.B. Tauris, p57.

Interlude

On Writing

She struggled with the writing. Her 'thing' was painting, not writing. The reading and thinking and writing had always been part of the 'painting', but this writing? This was a different kind of writing altogether. 'Rigour' is a favourite word within this kind of writing, as is 'academic' and 'voice'. Her voice felt very small at times, and her rigour quite rigour-less. She had never felt less academic.

Painting made things better. Paint moved easier than words; it flowed and blended, merged and ran. It flowed and merged and blended and ran effortlessly, without the need for rigour or structure or chapters. It followed no logic, no path, no plot, no story, no defined beginning, or end – and yet it documented a journey, it gave colour and depth to the problem of writing.

(Excerpt, reflective journal, June 2017)

At the very start of my PhD journey, paralysed with a very real fear of the monumental task ahead, I wrote in my reflective journal:

If I don't start, I can't fail

It took some considerable time before I came to realise how inherently mistaken I had been. If I was not prepared to accept that things could (and would) go wrong, how could I start to understand the importance of what could be learned from those failures? In order to move purposefully forward, I had to fundamentally must accept that 'failure is the measure of what has been recognised'.¹⁵⁹ The alternative is to accept a 'safe' situation of stasis, renouncing any desire or need to embrace failure as a mode of progress and creativity; something that in fact may be helpful for others engaging in research through practice.

As a painter I am *used to* failure, but that did not mean that I *liked* it or sought it. The mind-shift that I needed to make was instead to recognise that failure was an integral part of both my practice and my research process, and without it there would be no evolvement of either. I needed to embrace it and consider that some (but importantly not all) failures could re/present themselves as new possibilities. Indeed, Sarah Rubidge calls for 'a case for failure' to be considered:

In some ways the advancement of knowledge in a discipline may ultimately be greater in projects that fail than in projects which succeed satisfactorily, but perhaps not as fully as they might. The former demands that problems be addressed, the latter may be accepted as an adequate result and not pursued further or reflected upon without quite so much rigour.¹⁶⁰

Rubidge makes an interesting point here, along the lines of 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger' perhaps; failure enabling the painter to reflect on how something could be better approached, to bring life back into the process. It can be considered that it is from the acceptance of failure as a valid process and method, that we can locate un-signposted arenas where the seeds of new knowledge are formed. Since my research supports the primacy of process (which is inevitably messy) over polished object, does it follow that the 'failures' could indeed offer more potential for moving thinking and making forward than the so called resolved and critically acceptable 'successes'? Therefore, if my objective in

¹⁵⁹ Ettinger, B. (2006) *The Matrixical Borderspace*. USA: University of Minneapolis Press, pviii.

¹⁶⁰ Rubidge, S. (2004) *Artists in the Academy: Reflections on Artistic Practice as Research*. <https://ausdance.org.au/articles/details/artists-in-the-academy-reflections-on-artistic-practice-as-research> [Accessed 14 March 2019].

arguing for process to be re-afforded primacy over the object of painting, these failures must be recognised as unavoidable and perhaps desirable; the charged gap situated between what are very often binary divisions of success and failure, right and wrong, good and bad, must be actively sought and nurtured. To this end, I have begun to keep my own 'Inventory of Failure in Practice', and am curious to examine how this artefact – this record of rehearsals within my practice, of the potentiality of future progress yet to be realised – might be included in a future exhibition/exposition¹⁶¹ of process and methodology. Going forward, each point of failure will be documented, analysed and reflected upon, and the resulting taxonomy of results may indeed illuminate another path towards a newly defined and multifaceted methodology, one that is able to embrace failure and the potentiality of it. Failure is normally considered a negative position in any situation. However, in the context of art production, Baldessari examines the inevitability and rightness of the '*wrong*' and writes:

Art comes out of failure. You have to try things out. You can't sit around terrified of being incorrect, saying I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece.¹⁶²

To be able to harness the positive and potentially transformative power of failure could thus indeed prove more fruitful than we would imagine at the point of its occurrence, and especially in the context of art-based research. Lisa Le Feuvre too articulates this in her introduction to a seminal publication on the potentiality of success driven by failure in art production:

When failure is released from being a judgmental term, and success deemed overrated, the embrace of failure can become an act of bravery, of daring to go beyond normal practices and enter a realm of not-knowing.¹⁶³

And bravery is required to stray from the familiar and known routes, and daring to embrace the realm of 'not-knowing' is an important notion to consider along this particular pathway, for it is not until we *know* what we *don't know*, that this arena of possible transformation is open to us. Interestingly, where in the academic system are we ever introduced to the notion that sometimes we may need to *not* know or to *unknow*? Or that these states of not-knowing and un-knowing may open up new pathways of discovery?

We must embrace the not-known, and purposefully move towards the may-*never*-be-known, and to do so without fear or preconception. It is through not-knowing that we may begin to explore.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶¹ The discourse around exhibition/exposition will be explored in Chapter Four.

¹⁶² This was one of the short texts that accompanied his series of photographs entitled '*Wrong*', 1967.

¹⁶³ Le Feuvre, L. (2010) *Failure: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p13.

¹⁶⁴ Atkinson, D. (2017) *Art, Disobedience and Ethics: The Adventure of Pedagogy*. London, Palgrave MacMillan, p157.

This is a difficult concept to reconcile within academic research however, since desired outcomes are necessarily those that can be rigorously quantified and qualified. ‘Letting go’ might be one approach to overcome this. Indeed, Rachel Jones writes

Perhaps aesthetic wisdom lies in part in knowing how to let go of knowledge – or at least, of knowledge as conscious representation and conceptualisation – so as to let matter bring *its* intelligence to bear on the ways in which we work with it...it is an acceptance of not knowing that allows human intelligence *about* matter to be coupled with the guiding intelligence *of* matter. It is in this *between*, perhaps, that the creative practices of art and thought can take place.¹⁶⁵

This is important, that these spaces between the known and the unknown could provide us with fertile ground for exploration, experimentation, and creating. But it seems inherent in human nature that ‘the unknown’ represents the stuff of nightmares – a terror that we must overcome in order to discover the new.

And so, I came to rewrite that original statement, and I am forced to reflect on it every time I stand motionless in front of a blank canvas, the most terrifying beast known to painters.

If I won't fail, I can't start.

mess and play

I am mindful that mess and play, as with failure, are not terms generally synonymous with the rigour required of academic research. Mess is considered as unstructured - it has no defined edges; its purpose and outcomes are unknown. Mess is not generally regarded as a desirable state of being.

The ‘shape’ of *my* mess is formed through play: an unpredictable series of enactments performed without self-consciousness or predefined rules. The words often used to describe the process of painting too resonate with mess: drip, splatter, smudge, ooze, spread, spray, spill, daub, smear. As a painter, being bodily involved in the physical process of my work, I *become* part of that mess. (Never

¹⁶⁵ Fisher, E & Fortnum, R. (2013) *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*. London: Black Dog Publishing, p28.

trust a thin chef? Never trust a clean painter). The mess is hard to clean up; brushes become fossilised in the very medium they transport, mysterious fingerprints are found in places untouched, pots and jars of forgotten origin do not relinquish their solidified contents without a fight (figure 20).



Figure 44 *Studio of Francis Bacon*, 1992. Photograph by Perry Ogden.

As a painter, I live with this mess, I foster the production of mess, I find comfort in its company. This mess is purposeful - it represents the afterimage, it documents the activity that has taken place, it is vital to the process. Embracing mess (as the unpredictable and unknown) enables the painter to reach that place of 'no turning back', the 'space of exchange', the arena for transformation. For me as a painter, mess is not just a tangibly physical state of being. My workspace is messy, but so too is my thinking, my curiousness, my approach to inquiry. Mess is not a logical path, or a solid entity – it is fluid and morpic, seemingly without purpose.

Play and mess often go hand-in-hand; a partnership that we are encouraged to leave behind as we approach adulthood, and the spontaneous enjoyment of simple pleasures are overtaken by our

material wants and needs, responsibilities and commitments. Plato was the first to articulate a distinction between *frivolous* play (by which he intends the word frivolous as being simply for pure amusement)¹⁶⁶ and *motivated* play (that which facilitates mechanisms for growth and development of the individual).¹⁶⁷ I question whether we might have perhaps lost sight of this differentiation in our hectic and structured modern lives, and have also lost with it the ability to celebrate the importance of play (in both senses)? Play gives us a safe, non-judgmental environment in which we can explore our expanding world and rehearse our role within it – so why would we not want to continue to play as adults?¹⁶⁸ Both play and the resulting mess are integral to my painting process for all these reasons and more, and I accept them as such.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, eminent philosopher in the realm of hermeneutics,¹⁶⁹ wrote extensively on the functions and importance of different modes of play, positioning play as potentially being one of the keys to an ontological explanation. He also theorised on the role of play in the context of art production and understanding,

When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those engaging with the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself.¹⁷⁰

Mess and play as method? If the case for failure as method can be made in terms of rehearsal,¹⁷¹ as a benchmark of what has been achieved, as a transformative potential – then play and mess, I would argue, are indexically linked to ‘failure’. It is important to remember that failure is inherently instructive, since failing at any given task affords us the means to learn from that failing and work out how to succeed at future attempts. As artists, mess is inevitable, play is necessary, and failure is to be encouraged if we are to grow creatively. And we should not shy away from celebrating this uninhibited state of being,

The clean methodological ideal is what scholars are historically taught to strive towards. No ambiguity, no mess, no questions unanswered, neat lines and sharp conclusions. This is not

¹⁶⁶ Gadamer, H.G. (2013) *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p116

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ The importance of play to the social, physical, emotional and cognitive development of children was recognised by the United Nations Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child.

Office of the United Nations Commission for Human Rights: Convention on the Rights of the Child. General Assembly Resolution 44/25 of 20th November 1989. www.unhcr.org/html/menu3/b/k2crc.htm [Accessed 16th August 2019].

¹⁶⁹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, philosopher and author of *Truth and Method*; His magnum opus which served to widen the understanding of hermeneutics into a blueprint for our lived experience.

¹⁷⁰ Gadamer, H.G. (2013) *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p106

¹⁷¹ Mark Cannon describes failure as a ‘dress rehearsal’ in his article, *Learning from Failure*. Seel, N.M, Encyclopedia of Sciences of Learning, Springer Boston Press, 2012.

the reality of Practice as Research. It is messy. Mess is inherent in the process, without mess, no progress can be made.¹⁷²

As artists, the necessity of mess and play is embraced and understood. However, within academia there remains a continuing reluctance in accepting mess and play as valid methodological approaches. My own research, and practice as research, strives to redress this balance; as the artist Ben Vautier famously said, “Art is a dirty job, but somebody’s got to do it.”¹⁷³ New knowledge, new understanding, new ways of making – none of these can be accomplished without getting your hands dirty, and it is only through embracing the fear of the dirt and the mess that today’s ‘new’ can cross that boundary to become tomorrow’s ‘old’, and finally find acceptance as valid method.

pitfalls

I navigate this “agitated state of non-linear disequilibrium”¹⁷⁴ carefully; to embrace a journey where the seemingly chaotic, experimental and unknown may form a crucial element of the methodological process. I stay vigilant throughout; recognising the dangers and considering how they might be mitigated.

The investigation of any artistic or creative practice is fraught with tensions arising from questions surrounding subjectivity and bias. Traditionally, the inclusion of self-observation and self-reflection is regarded as being of little real value in the context of academic research. The issue of subjectivity is a valid one, since any method based purely on self-observation *could* be inherently biased towards the desired or required outcomes, bending the process to fit the mould. Mel Bochner,¹⁷⁵ American conceptual artist and academic, argues that the artist-researcher must therefore (over)compensate for the negative assumptions that will inevitably be made by adopting imaginative and exemplar systems for observation, documentation and analysis to demonstrate rigour in process. In short, the artist-researcher may find herself having to work twice as hard...

Shaun McNiff, writing on the very matter of arts-based methodologies, expresses his own thinking on the matter of subjectivity,

I want to emphasise how even though artistic expressions may come from within me, I nevertheless attempt to study the art objects and the process of making them as objectively as possible. I am intimately connected to what I make, and this relationship can further

¹⁷² Barone, T. & Eisner, E. (2012) *Arts Based Research*. London: Sage Publishing, p2.

¹⁷³ Phelan, P. & Lane, J. (1998) *The Ends of Performance*. New York: New York University Press, p326.

¹⁷⁴ Prigogine, I. (1996) *The End of Certainty*. New York: Free Press.

Beyond the subject for which it was written, this perfectly describes the washing-machine of emotions that I have experienced whilst writing this thesis in the grip of a seemingly self-perpetuating pandemic.

¹⁷⁵ Bochner, M. (2000) *Criteria Against Ourselves*, 2000. <http://qix.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/6/2/266> [Accessed 16 August 2019].

understanding, but it is still separate from me. The examination is both heuristic and empirical and thoroughly artistic.¹⁷⁶

This makes an important point; that whilst *within* the process of painting, I cannot avoid being subjective about the choices I make. As McNiff observes, this is primarily caused by the inherent immersive nature and ‘intimacy’ of that process. But within painting, once the ‘space of exchange’ is located, and the transubstantive potentials realised, is the point where I once again become separate from painting. This affords a space, a distance, where a certain objectivity can be applied.

outcomes

In Chapter Two we considered expanded notions of what constitutes painting. Here we have considered expanded notions of what constitutes research in painting, and art-based research. We have considered expanded notions of what a liminal methodology might look like, and the shape it presents as. It thus follows that notions of what the outcomes of such research might look like might also take a different form.

Kenneth Beittel, artist and academic, states that the traditional approaches to undertaking and organising research are no longer relevant since they “make an idol out of method, separating means from ends, motive from goal, and experience from knowing.”¹⁷⁷ Beittel instead argues that the *understanding* is the most important outcome of art-based research, not explanation or prediction. Similarly, James Elkins writes that it could be more purposeful to consider and measure the validity of the ‘outcomes’ of art-based research as “adding to our cumulative understanding of the world, rather than as a definitive contribution to ‘new knowledge’”.¹⁷⁸ I contend that this is of paramount importance when considering the ‘contribution’ that *this* research makes to ‘cumulative understanding’.

I bring this to the table; that my contribution is one of presenting an alternative understanding of how painting practice and research can be considered and executed. I have, through this liminal methodology created a space where traditional methods and modes of thinking can be restructured

¹⁷⁶ McNiff, S. (2008) Art-Based Research. In J.G. Knowles & A.I. Cole, eds. *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples and Issues*. London: Sage Publications Ltd, p31.

¹⁷⁷ Beittel, K. (1973) *Alternatives for Art Education Research: Inquiry into the Making of Art*. London: W.C. Brown & Company.

¹⁷⁸ Elkins, J. (2009) ‘Afterword: On Beyond Research and New Knowledge’, in *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*, MacLeod and Holdridge. p243.

and repurposed to create something new and unique. I have concluded that the 'Becomings' series of happenings and writings that I present throughout this thesis best represent this methodology. The 'Becomings' series relate to a number of case studies undertaken as an integral part of my research; they do not conform to a prescribed format, nor are they undertaken with any presupposed outcomes in mind. These events are staged, participants involved, and they 'happen'; they are improvised and spontaneous in nature, yet purposeful and valuable as a resource. Four of these Becomings are included in this submission. Whilst each event is unique and could never be replicated, there are commonalities between them. Most involve other participants, invited with only the briefest outline given, to encourage spontaneity and creativity. Participants are from a wide range of creative practices, as this interdisciplinary involvement also lends itself to uncovering new approaches 'other' to painting.

These 'Becomings' are the physical manifestation of my methodology; they are the documenting of the process and practice of art as it happens, at the very moment of it coming into being (the instant of be(com)ing). This small selection of writings embody an important contribution; making tangible this fragile liminal methodology, and demonstrating how working in unexpected ways can be considered valid research method.

My methodological strategies embody the characteristics of the liminal – offering a space of transformative potential, of thresholds to be transgressed into unknown and unknowing territories. It is where stuff happens. It sits in a place 'between'; it represents a threshold of be(com)ing; it is embedded with curiousness and knowing. It makes a w/hole from parts not necessarily thought to fit together, and it is this interwoven patchwork that allows for a flexible and adaptable approach – as the research evolves, so will my method breathe with it. Parts can be substituted, folded, relocated and reconfigured. The spaces between this complex and tangled non-structure are equally important and intriguing, encouraging adaptability and reflexivity; a multi-layered approach not affording primacy to any one path, but emphasising instead that thinking differently may lead us to unimagined destinations.

This is my liminal method/ology.

This is a 'space of exchange'; it offers the promise of the possible.

Chapter Four - Sites of Experimentation

“There is no such thing as a failed experiment, only experiments with unexpected outcomes.”

Richard Buckminster Fuller, *Critical Path* (1982)

The Studio-as-Laboratory

hypothesis

The artists' studio has until relatively recently been considered in a rather romanticised way; clichés of the tortured and solitary painter wrestling with her work in a damp and draughty loft-space abound. The painter is the Master of her studio and everything that resides in it. Traditionally only paintings considered 'finished' and 'worthy' are allowed to leave. The unresolved and unfinished works destined to languish against a bare wall, stacked tightly against each other, their future uncertain.

Following on from Chapter Two, we are now able to understand the activity of painting in an expanded sense. I will now consider the ways that the site of that making can be understood in the same way. Daniel Buren, writing in the 1970's was one of the first to formally recognise this shift in how the studio's function could be considered,

Of all the frames, envelopes and limits – usually not perceived and certainly never questioned – which enclose and constitute the work of art (picture frame, niche, pedestal, palace, church, gallery, museum...etc), there is one that is rarely even mentioned today that remains of primary importance: the artist's studio.¹⁷⁹

As Buren articulates, traditional modes of framing and considering painting were only concerned with painting as object. Process, regarded simply as the *work* of painting, was not of that conversation. However, much has been written about the studio since, recognising that it not simply a *place* of work, but operates as an embodiment of all that the contemporary artist is, and has to be. For in reality the artist's studio serves many functions. It is a vessel housing a multiplicity of activities – from thinking and making, to the mundanities of meeting place and storage facility. These studio activities do not always run concurrently, and the function of the studio will shift and change according to the needs of the painter. The studio can also be seen as a site of paradoxical activities; it can exist simultaneously as sanctuary and community, as space of detrital accumulation and valuable archive, as intimate space and public stage, as a place of creation and yet also one of (reluctant) burial. The studio is the embodiment of *backstage*, *frontstage*, and *places in-between*; notions that are explored later in this chapter.

¹⁷⁹ Buren, D & Repensek, T. (1979) The Function of the Studio. Source: October, Vol. 10. The MIT Press Stable. pp. 51-58 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/778628> [Accessed 14 March 2020].

Importantly, as the practice of painting has expanded beyond the two-dimensional frame and flat canvas surface, and the rigid notion of what painting 'is' is dismantled, the studio has increasingly come to be understood as a place of exploration and experimentation – perhaps even an ontology - and less as a space of pure production. Indeed, as Phillip Zarilli notes:

...the studio [is], a place of hypothesis, and therefore a place of possibility...where something can come out of nothing. Sound from silence. Light from darkness...a location where words count less...where ideas, intellect and the imagination are forged through an embodied practice.¹⁸⁰

Here, Zarilli positions the contemporary painter as a practising metaphysician, navigating the tricky waters between mind and matter in order to make sense of the world and her vision of it. For Zarilli the studio represents "a space between, a location without co-ordinates or answers"¹⁸¹- not a place of make-believe and fabulation, but a place of transition and transformation orchestrated by the artist. The description of the studio as a 'between' space is interesting here, suggesting the studio can also exist as a liminal space, somewhere between the painter and her material and work, a place of potential and creativity. I put forward that the studio, in this context, can also be considered as a 'space of exchange'; as I define in the introduction, it is a space for the encountering of material thinking, for the exploration of process as performative iteration, and of knowledge exchange.

However, not all have waxed lyrical about the studio and the happenings within. James Elkins likens the studio and the activity within to a site of psychosis; here the painter, after prolonged spells spent in isolation amongst the detritus and mess of making, will be unable to distinguish what is real and what is imagined. The noxious substances and creeping saturation of paint into every surface indeed inducing some sort of tangible madness. Elkins surmises that:

Working in a studio means leaving the clean world of normal life and moving into a shadowy domain where everything bears the marks of the singular obsession...The studio is a necessary insanity. Perhaps writers have insanities of paper, or of erasers, but they cannot compare with the multi-coloured dementia caused by fluids and stone.¹⁸²

And whilst it may be an uncomfortable and uncompromising way of being, this 'insanity' of the studio is seen as very necessary to the creative process by Elkins. Here I would like to pick up on this notion of a 'shadowy domain' of the studio, which I am reconceptualising as the 'studio-as-laboratory'; defined in the context of this research as a space of invention, experimentation, creation, and knowledge-making. In turn, I consider that this studio-as-laboratory is the place of practice for the painter-as-chemist, who works with and through the transubstantive potentials that exist within.

¹⁸⁰ Zarilli, P. (2011) 'The Metaphysical Studio'. In: Myers, T.R. (ed), *Painting: Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: MIT Press, p.104.

¹⁸¹ Ibid.

¹⁸² Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is: How to Think About Oil Painting Using the Language of Alchemy*. London: Routledge, p.147.

For my own vision of the entanglement of painting and alchemy is indeed brought together in the studio-as-laboratory whereby the alchemical is a process of discovery and a container for transformation, and where the painting process as experiential and experimental. I argue that the two come together within this 'space of exchange' to form the potentials of transubstantive happenings within that coupling.

I propose that such an immersion in the alchemical (as I have previously discussed) is key to understanding the potential of the studio-as-laboratory. The true forces and processes of painting exist beyond the established methods of scientific exploration and the safe place of known and discoverable data. Painting, like alchemy, exists in the slippages *between* the known and discoverable; it demands an immersion into the raw materials of the impending experiments and a faith that will compel the painter to seek out the moment of transmutation from material to object. And just as the medieval alchemist experimented with the alchemical transmutation of matter and material, so is the contemporary painter (the painter-as-chemist), able to consider the studio as her laboratory. Here, through my own practice, I will consider what this notion of the studio-as-laboratory means to the contemporary painter, and what purpose it may serve in my investigation into mysteries of the painting process.

It is important to recognise at this juncture that the studio-as-laboratory must not be confused with the science-laboratory, for their functions and methods are very different. The scientist, through a process of experimentation looks to move from what is unknown towards the known. Rather here, the painter, through a process of experimentation does the opposite, braving a move from the safety of what is known and into the perceived perils of the unknown. For both scientist and artist, outcomes might be predicted, but cannot be presumed; for both scientist and artist, only through determined and continued exploration can the expected/unexpected come into being.

studio-experiment

Here I will share the beginnings of a studio-experiment, initially borne out of necessity rather than a sense of curiousness, but I argue, perfectly illustrates and evidences the function of the studio-as-laboratory in driving thinking and practice forward.

As I began to consider how the end to my PhD journey might be in sight, I imagined how I might best present my practice to support my research. As a painter, how could I not contemplate an exhibition? I imagined what form this might take, where it might happen, and what I would paint in preparation.

And then came the global pandemic. Everything changed - and was likely to remain changed for a very long time. The School of Art was closed indefinitely. I was unable to access my shared studio-space in Digbeth. Lockdown meant we were all 'working from home'. I use the term loosely, since I had very few materials at home, and limited space to work in. (A carpeted spare bedroom does not a studio make.) For five months I felt very separate from my practice. My thinking and writing suffered as a consequence; the third ingredient – my painting practice – was missing, and I could not think or write without it. I had always understood that my research happens *through* my practice but had never considered the terrible impact that having my practice taken away might have.

I had to find ways to embody what was emerging as the studio-as-laboratory within myself – I had to find a refuge within my own being where it felt safe to think about my work, to plan exit strategies from this period of withdrawal, and contemplate new ways of working in these non-normative conditions.

I had to adapt.

It seemed appropriate to reduce the scale of my work, a shift from monumental to miniature that echoed the shrinkage of our lived experiences since the imposition of lockdowns, social distancing and isolation. This reductive process also extended to the materials I would choose to use; one tube of cadmium red (deep hue) oil paint and 150ml of epoxy resin. My aim was to conduct a small and simple experiment with these two materials, to record and analyse the reactions between them, and to produce an object that reflected this moment in time. I did not want to make 'a painting'. It felt wrong to attempt something so 'normal' whilst feeling so disconnected from painting. My aim was therefore to make something with paint (but without painting), that could perhaps illuminate a path back to painting; to develop a restorative process of intimacy with the paint, to illicit a trust that had become so lacking.

method

I prepared two small silicone cube moulds with release agent. The epoxy resin liquids were measured carefully, combined, stirred continuously for three minutes, then poured to fill the tiny moulds. These were placed in a small tray in case of spillages.

The oil paint was squeezed using an even pressure and allowed to find its way, in one continuous snakelike and sticky extrusion, into the resin. There was no attempt to guide the paint; it found its own form, coiling itself as it made contact with the base of the mould, just as it would have fallen had it been onto the palette.

The tray was covered loosely to avoid dust contaminating the resin. The resin/paint objects were left to cure for two days. The resin cubes were removed from the moulds, and the surfaces cleaned of excess paint.



Figure 45 Sally Bailey. *Untitled (Specimen No.1)*, 2020, oil paint, epoxy resin.

results

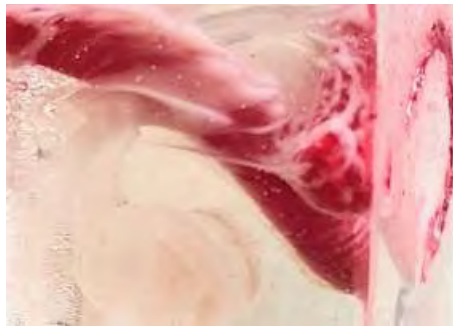


Figure 46 Sally Bailey, fragment ix.



Figure 47 Sally Bailey, fragment x.

The resin cubes were carefully examined. The paint remained viscous and leached from the places where it had made contact with the base of the mould, bleeding and wound like. Small areas of the resin had stuck to the mould; in places tiny crystalline fragments crumbled from the edges.

Where the paint extrusion had travelled through the resin, strange sinewy wisps made curious curling paths through the resin – perhaps the result of the oil reacting with the resin, or perhaps not. These fluid opaque entrails were frozen in time, the connective tissue between the materials used.

conclusions

What had this process produced? The solid object produced was in some ways gruesomely visceral, an abject representation of a captured moment. But I had found pleasure once again in making; dismantling notions of what is expected of me and my practice was freeing, but also necessary to my recovery from the prolonged period of painterly despair and creative paralysation.

This singular experimental act will have lasting consequences. This small piece of work brought me back to a place of thinking, and in turn to writing; it was a cathartic and important development.

Through this one small act of making, I had re/imagined the connections within my process to alchemy and the liminal as the sinewy tissue-strands captured within the resin, and I wondered what could grow from this creation. Like Paracelsus'

homunculus¹⁸³, which initially takes the shape of something transparent and strangely incorporeal, there is the potential for something living and growing to form.



Figure 48 Sally Bailey, fragment xi.

postscript

I am contemplating the notion of '*exhibitedness*'; that the gallery setting functions primarily to demonstrate the worthiness or value of the exhibit through practiced modes of presentation and representation?

Consider this image. My 'studio' is currently confined to a windowsill (in the carpeted spare bedroom).and yet I was overcome by an innate desire to present the cube on a stand or plinth – of no material relation to the work, but underlining its exhibitedness; this object is worthy of your attention and consideration because it is being displayed as such. The ridiculousness of this object on its plinth, itself on a sheet of kitchen paper atop a dirty windowsill is evident.

But I still did it.

¹⁸³ The alchemical writings of Paracelsus (1493-1541) include a 'recipe' for the creation of homunculi; human forms in miniature borne, of experiment not woman. The ingredients include male sperm, the sperm being putrefied in a sealed cucurbit (the lower vessel in the alchemists distilling apparatus) for forty days until it begins to form itself into the semblance of a tiny human. Paracelsus writes "*It will look something like a man, but transparent, without a body. If after this, it be fed wisely with the arcanum of human blood, and be nourished for up to forty weeks, and be kept in the even heat of the horse's womb, a living human child grows therefrom.*" However, the resulting 'man' will for ever be tiny and goblinlike.

Campbell, Mary Baine (2010) "Artificial men: Alchemy, transubstantiation, and the homunculus." *Republics of Letters: A Journal for the Study of Knowledge, Politics, and the Arts* 1 (2010): p4-15.

The small experiment I have shared serves as just one example of how the reconceptualised studio-as-laboratory can come into existence and can operate as/around/between the 'space of exchange'. Here, within the safe space of open-endedness, precarity, and possibility, I fostered the conditions for the initiation of presencing and be(com)ing as part of the painting process. The studio-as-laboratory can thus be argued to be a space of invention, experimentation, mess, and play; it is not concerned with preconceived destinations or prescribed outcomes, for this is a space that recognises the primacy of process in all its forms.

So, what does the notion of the studio-as-laboratory mean to the contemporary painter, and what purpose does it serve? My conclusion is that there can be no one singular answer to this question, since no two painters will live, work, and think in this space in exactly the same way. The only certainty is that the studio is best conceived, not as a built physical space, but more as a theoretical site for experimental thinking and making that is embodied within the painter herself, and a 'space of exchange' and (alchemical) possibility.

Elkins writes on the relationship between artist and practice,

Artists know the feeling that others can only weakly imagine, of being so close to their work that they cannot distinguish themselves from it...in this state of mind there is no distinction between theory and practice, observer and observed, substance and allegory, observation and empathy. They are their work.¹⁸⁴

The essence of the studio, and all that it represents, resides within.

¹⁸⁴ Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is: How to think about oil painting, using the language of Alchemy*. New York: Routledge, p165-166.

Exhibition/Exposition

I would like to ponder further on the tension that exists between Painting as Process and Painting as Object. If my argument is to promote the primacy of evolving process over that of static object in the context of contemporary painting, it might therefore be logical that the traditional notion of the exhibition may be considered at best less relevant, or in the most extreme scenario, somewhat redundant. Unpicking and testing how to address this tension will undoubtedly form a key part of my methodology and could be framed as being central to the research.

The traditional exhibition, as a display of art objects, most often conforms to a simple tried and tested template. However, I argue that the gallery setting of pristine white walls bedecked with smartly framed and varnished works, allows for none of the contingent messiness, the struggles with uncooperative materials, or the sheer exhilaration when executing a single perfect stroke, to be displayed. Of the exhibition setting Christoph Grunenberg writes, is most often imagined as:

...a simple, undecorated space with white walls and a polished wood floor or soft grey carpet. Paintings are hung wide apart in a single row, sometimes with only one large work on each wall...The works of art are evenly lit, usually by spotlights hanging from the ceiling or by ambient neon light. In this specialised viewing context, mundane objects may be mistaken – momentarily at least- for works of art.¹⁸⁵

Arguably, although an accurate depiction of many gallery and museum settings, many have sought to disrupt this model; I cite The Outdoor Art Project, Kings Cross, London as just one example (figure 22). Established in 2020, this is a permanent outdoor exhibition featuring an ever-changing programme of local and international artists.

¹⁸⁵ Grunenberg, C. (1999) The Modern Art Museum. In *Contemporary Cultures of Display*, Emma Barker, ed. London: Yale University Press in conjunction with The Open University, p26.



Figure 49 Outside Art Project, Kings Cross, London, 2020.

I too intend to experiment with the notion of the traditional exhibition format and accepted conventions of display, where we find (and perhaps expect to find) Grunenberg's vision. I instead put forward that in the viva presentation an *exposition* of work could be more relevant, in that it allows for an exposing of the process of making, taking the viewer into the heart of the painters practice and laying bare all that it entails. I argue, following on from Chapter Two, that an exhibition of finished, resolved and carefully created works cannot offer the viewer that experience. For the traditional gallery-museum exhibition sits aloofly as a physical demonstration of the painter's ability - but gives little insight as to how these carefully varnished objects are imagined, created and born into that clean, sanitised gallery world.

As long ago as the 1960s the long-term future of the exhibition format was being questioned, in the context of the rapidly evolving artworld of that time. Hans Neuberg, artist and exhibition designer, defined the basic function of the exhibition very succinctly:

We do not need to waste too many words explaining what an exhibition is and the functions which it exercises. To exhibit is to show, to demonstrate, to inform, to offer.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸⁶ <http://a-g-i.org/user/hansneuberg/> [Accessed 2 March 2021]

But my argument is this: why should the showing and demonstrating, be only of the art object -since the informing and the offering of process could indeed be as appropriate, insightful, and interesting? Neuberger wrote quite scathingly about the notion of such group exhibitions and their value to the artists included, claiming that the majority of artists do not benefit greatly from taking part in exhibitions such as these - primarily because the curatorial direction to achieve cohesiveness among a group of artists is to focus on the similarities between works, which will always be to the detriment the of individual artists included.¹⁸⁷ Daniel Buren also questions the continued relevance of the exhibition, denouncing the unappetising quality of 'self-aggrandisement'¹⁸⁸ that seems to increasingly trouble the reputation of exhibition-making. He writes:

The subject of exhibitions tends more and more to not be so much the exhibition of the works of art, as the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art. ¹⁸⁹

For as long as I can remember, I have visited the Royal Academy Summer Show every year in late June. (Until this year. The 2020 Summer Show has now become the #SummerNotSummer 2020 Show, and at the time of writing my tickets for December 5th seem perilously close to being cancelled again). I have over time come to view this spectacle as a prime example of the Exhibition *as* Work of Art – with 'celebrity artist' curators,¹⁹⁰ themed halls, theatrical interludes, and an Opening Night like no other outside of Hollywood. And yet I still find the quietest of pleasures are to be found in the crammed 'public' rooms, where the salon-hang reaches to the roof, and any nod to a curated display seems largely abandoned.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸⁸ Daniel Buren's article was commissioned for the catalogue of the 'documenta 5' exhibition in Kassel, which ran from 30th June to 8 October, 1972. www.on-curating.org/issue-33-reader/the-master-of-the-works-daniel-burens-contribution-to-documenta-5-in-kassel-1972.html#_edn12 [Accessed 2 February 2021].

¹⁸⁹ Ibid.

¹⁹⁰ The 2018 Summer Exhibition, celebrating the 250th anniversary of the event, was curated by Grayson Perry, RA. I considered the event as colourful and unconventional as Perry himself.



Figure 50 Installation view, Summer Exhibition, Royal Academy of Art, 2018. Photograph by Sally Bailey.

The painter has traditionally been believed to be concerned primarily with an elaborate process of ‘hiding making/showing creation’,¹⁹¹ which had shaped the notion of modern exhibition. There was historically a reluctance of the artist to share the magic of their process, to give away the reality of the struggle, and lift the cloak of their mastery; preferring instead to present the visually pleasing and critically challenging resolved outcomes in the context of the exhibition. But this is not true in all cases

¹⁹¹ This is borrowed from the title of a book on making and the function of the studio:
Esner, R. et al, eds. (2014) *Hiding Making – Showing Creation: The Studio from Turner to Tacita Dean*. Amsterdam University Press

today. I offer by way of example, the 2009 Rijksakademie Open, Denmark, whereby more than fifty artists across the city opened their studios to the public, to be observed as they worked – aiming to demystify the hidden processes of the studio, and therefore revealing the true nature and function of this workspace.



Figure 51 Participating Studio. Rijksakademie Open, Denmark. 2009.

However, whilst the intention of the project was clear, sadly the full potential of these aims was not achieved - since it became apparent that many of the studios were tidied and primped prior to opening, and the 'work' felt somewhat staged under the intense scrutiny of stark public observation.

This was less studio-as-laboratory, and more a sanitised and curated notion of showing-making; the artist perhaps as happy to show their process *to a point*, but only the fragments that they felt comfortable or beneficial to show. This raises questions in that if practice is a coming together of fragments, 'between-moments', remnants and residues – how could this better be exhibited? Indeed, does it need to be exhibited at all; should it remain the secret of the orchestrator? For in the overt attempt to contextualise, explain, and articulate the 'work', it will lose its intended function?



Figure 52 Participating Studio. Rijksakademie Open, Denmark, 2009.



Figure 53 Participating Studio. Rijksakademie Open, Denmark, 2009.

The prevailing issue of Covid 19 and its impact on possibilities for exhibition are important here; the opportunity for traditional exhibition is potentially taken away for now at least,¹⁹² and as in so many areas of our lives, 'new' ways of doing need to be explored. The concept of 'exhibition' unwittingly becomes a site of necessary experimentation and change. Many traditional gallery spaces and museums face a very uncertain future; enforced closures and restricted visitor numbers will inevitably lead to permanent closures, such that even these 'traditional' exhibition spaces will have to embrace experimentation and changes in the 'how' of exhibiting work in order to be counted among the survivors.

The logical conclusion emerging is that perhaps the notion of exhibition (within the gallery setting) is outdated. As Stuart Morgan writes:

Enough of exhibition. We know its vain display, its encyclopaedic aspirations, its tendency to turn, showing off. Consider inhibition instead.¹⁹³

Morgan considers that the vanity of exhibition-making becomes inappropriate, and that to look inward – towards a process of making, and thinking, and what I argue of presencing and be(com)ing – may make far more sense. I suggest that the alternative mode of disseminating practice, and the process of that practice, could be through *exposition* rather than inhibition? Exposition as an exposing, making public, demonstrating and performing risk - rather than inhibition, that in the context of this research unhelpfully enables a mindful level of restraint in the exhibiting of work?

This is a notion put forward by Carole Gray, in considering how a professional-researcher¹⁹⁴ might better approach the viva and accompanying exhibition of 'work'. Gray writes:

The concept of 'exhibition' carries with it so much baggage!...the word 'exposition' seems much more appropriate for research purposes, as its suggestion of exposure and explication matches very well the key characteristics of good research – accessibility, transparency, transferability...Explicitness about criteria for evaluating research findings – especially art/design work produced as part of a research argument – is an essential feature.¹⁹⁵

Gray problematises the traditional viva format, citing the advantages of expositional presentation as offering an opportunity for an instructive and heuristic exchange of dialogue and understanding

¹⁹² It is important to acknowledge that this chapter was written during the first wave of the pandemic, and whilst galleries, museums and exhibition spaces are now able to welcome visitors, the restrictions on numbers, and the impacts of social distancing, remain in place. It is, at this point difficult to see that anything will return to 'normal' at all.

¹⁹³ <https://www.frieze.com/article/stuart-morgan> [Accessed 16 March 2021]

¹⁹⁴ Gray, C. and Malins, J. (2004) *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research process in Art and Design*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Limited, p169.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. p168.

between the viva panel and the artist¹⁹⁶. I concur with Gray's analysis in that an Exposition of Process/Practice could indeed be considered as a new economy of representation – and perhaps now is the time to pare back, to remove unnecessary levels of complexity, and reveal the vulnerability in the processes of thinking and making?

Exposition is distinct from the traditional approach of exhibition in that it '*cuts against the conventions of archival display*'¹⁹⁷, particularly in relation to the display of art works. Schwab and Bergdorff offer this succinct definition of exposition, which celebrates process and open-ended possibility:

Exposition is an introduction. Exposition need not tell what something is; rather, it can set the ground for a play to follow, which can be open-ended and need not be concluded....Although introduction suggests discursiveness, what is meant here is not so much explanation but a willingness to share materials and modes of thinking and doing.¹⁹⁸

This articulation of what 'exposition' is, contributes to my argument regarding the re/positioning of process in contemporary painting practice. It can indeed bring about a paradigm shift in how painting is fundamentally encountered and experienced; by sharing these modes of making and knowledge production the 'inner world' of painting can become more readily accessible to the audience. I put forward that the notion of exposition, in the context of the viva presentation, occupies a liminal space; it sits between process as practice and exhibition. The viva-exhibition functions as a 'space of exchange', better positioned to enable a sharing and understanding of material thinking, methods, and knowledges.

I return to the beginning of this chapter, where I imagined what shape the viva exhibition/exposition to accompany this thesis might take. Through my research, my practice, and taking the impact of the pandemic into account, I intend to take this more experimental approach – to present an exposition of process; documenting the journey of experimentation and the methodologies employed therein. The outcomes of experimentation will be displayed and viewed as in an exhibition, but here they are to be understood as functioning as an exposition of *epistemic things*,¹⁹⁹ in a continuing process of evolving and revealing; they reflect a material moment in time, the beginnings of *presencing*.

Very recently I have been re-introduced to the notion of *frontstage/backstage*, a sociological concept devised by Erving Goffman, and first introduced in his book '*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*',²⁰⁰ which I explored in the initial stages of this research. Goffman draws on the metaphor of the

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Slager, H. *Critique of Archival Reason*, RHA, Dublin, 18.02.2010 to 07.03.2010. www.rhagallery.ie/exhibitions/critique-of-archival-reason/ [Accessed 30th June 2019].

¹⁹⁸ Schwab, M. & Bergdorff, H. (2015) *The Exposition of Artistic Research; Publishing Art in Academia*, Leiden University Press, p17.

¹⁹⁹ Rheinberger, H. (1997) *Towards a History of Epistemic Things*. New York: Stanford University Press.

²⁰⁰ Goffman, E. (1990) *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. London: Penguin.

Theatre in order to explain different patterns of individual and group behaviours and social interactions. *Frontstage* behaviour is typified by a desire to fit with expected norms, manner and appearance – it is how we ‘act’ when we know others are watching and judging. By contrast, the *backstage* is more the expression of our true self; free from social expectation we can ‘dance like no-one is watching’! This notion of patterns of behaviour understood as performed events resonates deeply with my own ideas of painting as a performative/performed activity, and the studio-as-laboratory. In particular it links to process taking primacy over outcome, and the tensions that arise from the traditional expectation of resolved ‘work’ and the exhibition of that work to confirm its value and status.

This chapter concludes with *Becoming#3*, a residency undertaken as an opportunity to further explore this concept of studio-as-laboratory, and the usefulness of experimentation and improvisation in both art practice and methodological approaches to artistic research. This residency is a ‘space of exchange’.

I am backstage.

Becoming #3 The Wig

Place: The Wig, Great Tindall Street, Birmingham.

Date: 14-28th May 2017.

Aims: To explore the process of painting through text, performance, film and soundscape.



Figure 54 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk. *DNAH*, Film still, 2017.

Event:

The Wig (since rebranded as Failbetter) is an independent artist-run space in Birmingham. An important part of their ethos is to offer a comprehensive Short Residency programme designed to offer participating artists a testing-ground for experimental work. This event was important for me on two levels – firstly as an initial exploration of my emerging ideas around re/positioning the primacy of

process within contemporary painting practice. Secondly, the outcomes and the residues of the residency were to be gathered, evaluated and re-presented as an academic paper at the forthcoming PGR Studio Conference, Beyond Borders. This residency was an explicit exercise in disrupting the traditionally accepted format of painting leading to the exhibition of resolved work, instead focusing on the unseen messy processes of that practice and recording that process in a way that negated the necessity of the art object as the quantifiable outcome.

Initially I worked on a monologue that would form the starting point for this experiment. This text evolved from the fragments of my reflective journal, my research notes, and the internalised conversations I have with myself as I paint. Dan Auluk and Alex Billingham then joined me in the exhibition space as participants to play, perform, paint and film the proceedings.



Figure 55 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk, *DNAH*. Film still, 2017.

As I performed the monologue, Auluk, stripped from his everyday clothes, swathed in exotic fabrics and elaborately blindfolded, began to make marks on paper in response to the spoken words. His movements were tentative at the outset, but as the performing of the text gained momentum the mark-making became increasingly frenzied and overtly ritualistic; paint, paper and body became one. At the end of this activity, the remaining paint was poured slowly from a height, and Auluk symbolically washed his hands in the sticky liquid and lay down silently in the pool at his feet. Billingham filmed the proceedings, dexterously tiptoeing around Auluk and avoiding the paint.



Figure 56 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk, *DNAH*. Film still, 2017.

Outcomes:

This project marked a huge shift in my thinking, practice and research. To move out of my own studio space, surrounded by the 'stuff' of painting (rejected paintings, unfinished paintings, bubble-wrapped exhibited works, co-workers who *expected* me to make paintings, and *only* paintings) was an unintentionally productive decision. Relieved

of all these encumbrances, I set myself no expectations, and was able to truly explore the *process* in isolation. Throughout the entire residency, I had not touched any paint, but ultimately felt more connected to painting than ever before.

We gathered up the entire making-residue of the residency; every piece of paint-stained paper, congealed paintbrush, dirty paper towel, and discarded scripts. It had all been a part of this making experiment, and no arbitrary decisions would be made as to its future usefulness or relevance. Each item would be documented and evaluated for research purposes; liberated from the expectation that an art object would be the outcome, each scrap of paper, each cloth that mopped up the spilled paint became that object, and each one was of equal worth.

The recorded footage was edited by Auluk, the resulting film becoming simultaneously art object, and archival document.



Figure 57 Sally Bailey and Dan Auluk, *DNAH*. Film Still, 2017.

This initial #Becoming has since been shaped into a purposeful and defined method through which I can continue to make exciting advances in my research through practice, and practice through research. The collaborative experience enabled me to approach my practice in completely unexpected and satisfyingly innovative ways; I consider that introducing these new ways of making and thinking into my practice has consequently informed my research also, again highlighting the firmly imbricated nature of the artist-researchers work.

Viva la Collaboration!

Interlude

Stuff.

...the events I have been involved in are essentially 'spaces of exchange' where 'stuff' happens. There is no preconceived outcome to be worked towards; stuff happens, stuff is responded to, stuff gets messy, stuff breeds more stuff, and stuff can go wrong. But it is the stuff that is important here. Nothing gets made, gets learned, gets recognised, without there being that essential ingredient of stuff in the first place.

(Excerpt from Reflective Journal, 2020)

Chapter Five - (Liminal) Conversations

“In the best conversations, you don't even remember what you talked about, only how it felt. It felt like we were in some place your body can't visit, some place with no ceiling and no walls and no floor.”

John Green, *Turtles All The Way Down* (2017)

Collaboration as Conversation

chatter

This chapter will consider the potential for conversation that exists within the collaborative making process. Collaboration, like all good conversations, requires a reciprocal back and forth, a metaphorical dance where all can contribute and share the spotlight. Traditionally, collaboration is not a common conversation that occurs between painters, but from first-hand experience I make a case for considering how embracing this approach can bring a greater depth to our artistic vocabulary and outlets for this new voice.

These conversations all bear the hallmarks of the liminal. They occur in the hidden between-spaces of thinking and making. These conversations can be transitory, ephemeral, slippery and fleeting, and simultaneously solid, enduring, and challenging. But whichever form they take, these conversations all play an important role in the process of drawing out the transformational moment of be(com)ing held within the 'space of exchange'.

participation

All artists are alike. They dream of doing something that's more social, more collaborative, and more real than art.²⁰¹

This statement from photographer Dan Graham opens Claire Bishop's essay '*The Social Turn: Collaboration and Its Discontents*'²⁰², in which Bishop critiques Nicolas Bourriaud's notion of collaboration and participation as defined in his seminal text '*Relational Aesthetics*'²⁰³. It serves as a catalyst for debate in Bishop's essay, questioning the validity and value of collaboration and participation in today's increasingly fractured society, and asks what art can realistically contribute to its reparation.

Considering this opening statement, I argue that all artists are *not* alike, and certainly not all are comfortable considering collaboration to be useful to their established practice, let alone dreaming of such as Graham states. Take the traditional (imagined) image of the painter – a habitually solitary creature, working secretively and unseen – until her work is 'ready' to be revealed perhaps, and she

²⁰¹ Graham, D. in Bishop, C. (2006). *The Social Turn: Collaboration And its Discontents*. Artforum International., Vol 44, p178.

²⁰² Bishop, C. (2006). *The Social Turn: Collaboration And its Discontents*. Artforum International., Vol 44, 178-183.

²⁰³ Bourriaud, N. (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presse Du Reel.

emerges from her '*cave of making*'²⁰⁴ to present her creation. Robert Motherwell, as a painter, was well-placed to make this observation: "Painters don't really want to paint in front of anyone. They prefer to make their mistakes without anyone watching."²⁰⁵ The painter is (almost) always considered in the singular, and as the sole author of her work. But is this *really* so?

Historically there are many anecdotes and documents detailing the working methods of the Old Masters, joined in their studio by numerous apprentices and studio-hands employed to prepare pigments and mediums, and to work on particular sections of the epic canvasses under the direction of The Painter. This was a practice that was borne out of necessity, since these artists (Rembrandt, Titian, Rubens, et al) were often commissioned to produce eye-wateringly large-scale projects. One such example of is that of Michelangelo, who employed numerous assistants to paint the backgrounds on the Sistine Chapel ceiling between 1508 and 1512. The painting below (see Figure 27) offers a representation of how this mode of working might have looked.



Figure 58 Jack Hayes, *Michelangelo Painting the Sistine Chapel*, 1964. Gouache on board, 26 x27cm.

Assistants were employed for both practical and economic reasons; the preparations of surfaces and mediums was laborious, the painting of backgrounds and skiesapes time-consuming, and in order to satisfy patrons in a timely manner it served the (successful) painter well to delegate as many of these more menial tasks as possible. Although these painters were surrounded 'by' others, this was not working 'with' others, in any collaborative sense; the contribution from their team of co-workers was purely physical, tightly directed and controlled, leaving no room here for suggestion or imagination. Employing studio assistants in this manner did not diminish the reputation

²⁰⁴ Bhabha H. (2009) Preface: In the Cave of Making. In Ikas, K. & Wagner, G. (eds), *Communicating in the Third Space*. New York: Routledge p.ix.

²⁰⁵ Motherwell, R. (2007) *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*. USA: University of California Press, p32.

of the Renaissance Masters however, it served only to enhance it. For this process confirmed the status of the artist and underlined that his reputation demanded it.

Perhaps the best contemporary examples of this painting process today are found within the studios of artists such as Jeff Koons (who, according to an article published in the *Wall Street Journal* (2001)²⁰⁶, is purported to have had up to 150 assistants at any one time), Damien Hirst (who outsourced his 331 spot paintings to home-workers,²⁰⁷ and continues to work in this vein), and Anish Kapoor. All employ multiple studio assistants, and often absolve all aspects of making to those assistants, whilst still marketing and exhibiting those works under their own name. This has become an increasingly contentious issue within the artworld, questioning authorship, authenticity, and worth. The renaissance studio-hand would work hard to complete his apprenticeship, and then often would pursue their own path as a Painter. By contrast, the contemporary studio assistant remains anonymous and is often bound by inhibitive contracts and non-disclosure agreements preventing them from seeking other creative opportunities.

More recently, and taking this mode of production to the extreme, is the example of the American painter Kehinde Wiley (b. 1977). Painting large and colourful portraits of young African American men, Wiley quickly established a hugely successful and lucrative career as a painter; so successful that it was difficult to keep up with demand. To this end, Wiley established no fewer than three International studios (in New York, Dakar, and Beijing), where assistants would produce the finished paintings for him (Figure 28).

²⁰⁶ www.online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303745304576357681741418282.html?reflink=desktopwebshare_permalink [Accessed 24 April 2021]

²⁰⁷ www.nowness.com/series/reflections/damien-hirst-on-the-spot [Accessed 24 April 2021]



Figure 59 Kehinde Wiley in his Beijing studio. Photograph: Matthew Niederhauser.

encounter

We return briefly to the work of Nicolas Bourriaud, who drew attention to the notion of the collaborative in his most famous work, *'Relational Aesthetics'*. Bourriaud stated that:

The role of artworks is no longer to form imaginary and utopian realities, but to actually be ways of living and models of action within the existing real, whatever the scale chosen by the artist.²⁰⁸

He argued that relational art had the potential to provide praxical strategies that could encourage the reconstruction of the social, and a new model for living. In order to achieve this, he argues that true art in this sense should forego the traditional space of the gallery or studio, and position itself *within* the lived world, the 'social' environment²⁰⁹. It is this experience and encounter that then becomes the work of art, rather than the art object as a re/presentation of that encounter. Rirkrit Tiravanija's solo exhibition *Untitled (Free)*,²¹⁰ is a good example of this 90's phenomena of 'Relational Art'.²¹¹ Although

²⁰⁸ Bourriaud, N. (1998) *Relational Aesthetics*. Paris: Les Presse Du Reel, p.13.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p15

²¹⁰ The exhibition, *Untitled (Free)*, took place at 303 Gallery, New York in 1992.

²¹¹ Ibid, p15

located within a traditional gallery setting, Tiravanija disrupted the space by installing a fully functioning kitchen, and cooking Thai food for visitors throughout the exhibition. Through this performative act of making and sharing food, it is the encounter that becomes the art object on display, whilst the artist curates the delicious encounter (Figure 29).



Figure 60 Rirkrit Tiravanija, *Untitled (Free)*, 1992. Installation view: 303 Gallery, New York.

Bourriaud suggests that collaboration and participation are the best models for achieving his stated objective. My criticism with this notion is that it does not consider the multiple modalities of collaborative and participatory practice that can exist, and how the nuances in fundamental structure and operational differences can affect both the encounter, participation, and the outcome.

To talk of collaboration as a mode of art-working is not straightforward; as Ellen Mara De Wachter muses, it is a term that is “both useful and vague”.²¹² Indeed, to talk of painting and collaborative practice, or of a collaborative painting practice, might at first seem *less* than useful; an oxymoronic endeavour perhaps, given the oft-peddled solitary persona of the painter already discussed. It therefore requires that I offer a definition of collaboration evidenced in my own practice as research.

²¹² De Wachter, E.M. (2017) *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, p19.

The basis for my own interpretation and practice of collaboration is rooted in the position Paul Carter sets out in his book, *'Material Thinking'*²¹³ (previously discussed in Chapter Three). This has proven to be a key text in contributing to my own thinking processes; Carter's notion of material thinking places primacy on the materiality of making as knowledge production; that it is the tactility of, and the connection to, the materialness of making that is able to unleash forces within us that thinking alone cannot²¹⁴. Carter also talks of collaboration in terms of conversation:

In the end, collaboration is not simply a pragmatic response to increasingly complex working conditions; it is what begins to happen whenever artists talk about what they are doing, in that simple but enigmatic step, joining hand, eye and mind in a process of material thinking.²¹⁵

Carter considers collaboration to be a process of two parts: that of 'dismemberment', and then 'reassembly'²¹⁶. For Carter, dismemberment is the process whereby all participants join the encounter without preconceived notions of role, materials, method or outcome – and leave their egos at the collaborative door. Once this criterion is met, the reassembling can begin, putting the contributions that each member is able to bring to the encounter, back together in a way Carter describes as 'remembered'²¹⁷, for they are not remembered, since they have never been assembled together in exactly that way before. And it is at this point of the putting-back-together, and forming from the conversations that take place, that I argue presencing begins, and the 'art' of the event comes into being.

This brings me to consider how the collaborative process relates to my notion of a 'space of exchange', and ways in which this space can be located, and the potential forces therein absorbed into thinking, making, and knowledge production. I do not envisage that this 'space' is a singular entity; the 'space of exchange' exists as a multiplicity and can be accessed in many ways – through thinking, making, writing, performing, or through dialogue and conversation. It is perhaps possible that a 'space of exchange', and hence knowledge production, can be located and exploited by the collaborative participants where it may previously have proved inaccessible to the individual.

Collaborative interventions allow for the discovery of a 'space of exchange' in the truest sense – all activity undertaken is done so based on a system of reciprocity, of a sharing for equal benefit, and a

²¹³ Carter, P. (2004) *Material Thinking: The Theory and Practice and Creative Research*. Australia: Melbourne University Press.

²¹⁴ Ibid, p9

²¹⁵ Ibid, p10

²¹⁶ Ibid, p12

²¹⁷ Ibid, p12

prevailing mood of kindness, conversation, and connectedness. The process involves an exhilarating sharing of minds, voices, and ideas, a coming together of creative skills and unseen knowledges, but also an appreciation of the dangers and risks involved that could render the collaboration void at any point in the process. Embracing this risk, and employing strategies of trust and open-mindedness, are crucial to the success of collaborative working. Matthew Collings likens the process to a jam session:

It is definitely improvisational; you can't necessarily say how it's going to end up and it certainly isn't preconceived. There is a division of labour, but there's also riffing, like one is doing the guitar and there's suddenly a drum solo.²¹⁸

In this respect, the collaboration is to be understood therefore as a non-hierarchical entity; my noise is as valid as your noise in the riff.

Those joining may, or equally may not, have a common practice – and this is important since the collaboration in the early stages of Carters 'dismemberment' is not simply about thinking and making as you always have done (albeit in the convivial company of others), but about establishing connections and conversations from which innovation can develop organically. Some loose commonalities may be established in the initial stages of forming the collaborative unit; it is highly likely that those coming together might share social or professional networks, or be from the same institution or geographical location, but all will be motivated by the possibilities and unseen potentials of the event, and the anticipation of unknown outcomes. The collaborative space in this context can be seen to operate as a 'space of exchange', and the site of this collaborative engagement as a further iteration of the studio-as-laboratory.

This chapter considers how collaboration can function as conversation, in the context of reciprocal exchanges, but as the title of the chapter suggests, I argue that it can also be considered in terms of a (liminal) conversation.

Although collaborative practices can take many forms, I argue that they fall into, and between, two main categories: collaboration as a temporary and ephemeral intervention or project, and collaboration as a permanent working partnership. The Singh Twins are one such (intriguing) example of this latter interpretation; they work together, sitting side by side, painting together on the same piece, painting in unison.

²¹⁸ De Wachter, E.M. (2017) *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, p129.



Figure 61 The Singh Twins, 2012. *Indigo: The Colour of India (detail)*. Mixed media, 180 x 120cms.

For the Singh Twins, theirs is a career and life-long connection – they see, paint, and think as one, and they present themselves publicly as one. Above is a detail from one of their exquisite paintings (figure 30), from a recent ‘solo’ exhibition, *Slaves of Fashion*²¹⁹; their contemporary revival of Indian miniature painting tackling hybrid representations of modern society and historical cultural conflicts.

However, it is the first category of collaborative working – that of the temporary intervention or singular project - that I will explore in relation to (liminal) conversations, and the context of this research as evidenced in my own practice.

auluk&bailey

I first met Dan Auluk as we both embarked on the MAFA course at the Birmingham School of Art in 2012; we were instantly friends, and soon to become co-conspirators. For our first MA assessment point, we staged a collaborative exhibition²²⁰ of our work – and from that point in the stage was set. This was the first time I had worked collaboratively, and I was instantly drawn to this unchoreographed, unpredictable, and challenging way of working. Coming together as a painter and a filmmaker, we had to consider our own work from different perspectives, and the conversations that ensued were new and exciting. We entered the exhibition space with no preconceived notions of how the exhibition would look, or how our separate works would talk to each other; the conversation evolved slowly and organically, our works became one work, and the exhibition was deemed a great success.

²¹⁹ *Slaves of Fashion*, Walker Art gallery, Liverpool, 2018.

²²⁰ *Blink*, 2013, Works Gallery, Pershore Street, Birmingham. This exhibition combined film, projection, painting and sound; it was shown as a single body of work, and it continued to evolve through the week-long showing.

Following this, I was invited to join Auluk's residency/exhibition/performance event, *Zombie Poverty*, staged at the ARTicle Gallery, (Birmingham School of Art, 2013, figure 31), as both collaborative artist and writer-in-residence. Again, this relationship of instigator/conspirator, within the context of the event as disruption/conversation, produced a palpable tension, a sense that any notion of cohesion could collapse at any moment. This was an ambitious 'event' in three parts - a show that precociously opened and closed on the same night, leading into a series of micro-residences, and culminating in this second opening of unpredicted and undirected outcomes. It was always going to be a difficult journey; this was not an exhibition based on polite curatorial etiquette - Auluk was out to disrupt right from the off, with this highly experimental de/evolving residency programme ultimately defining the success or otherwise of his endeavour. His strategy was risky, and his enthusiasm admirable.

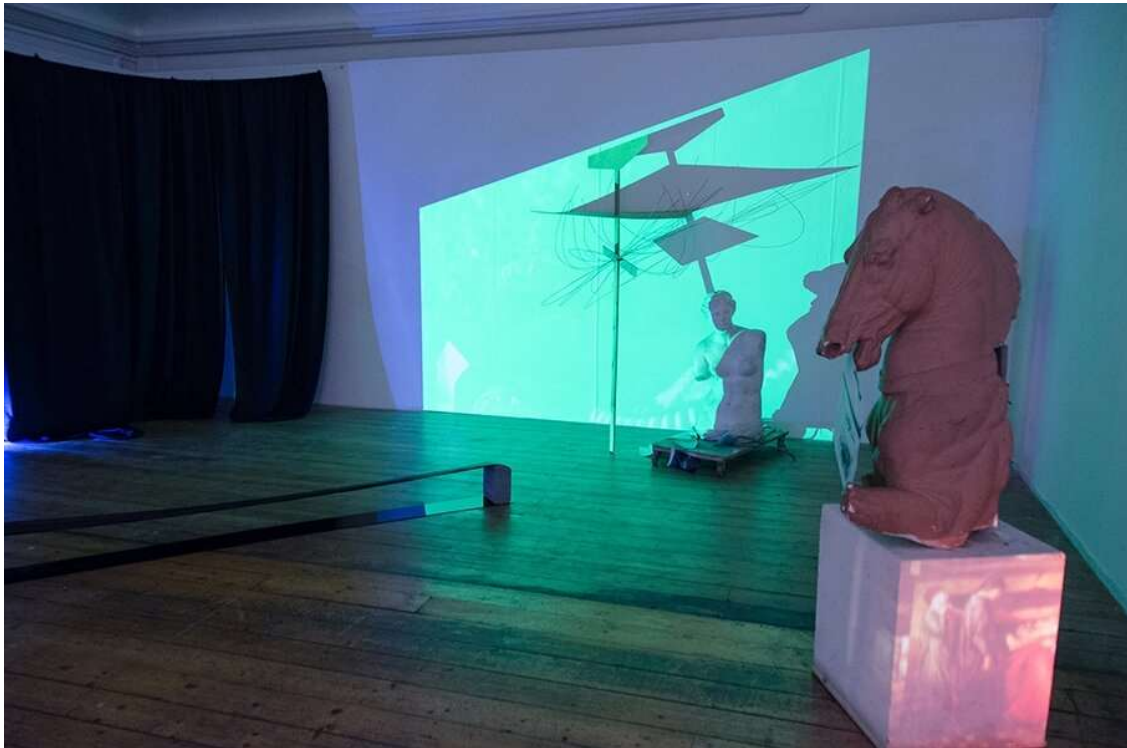


Figure 62 *Zombie Poverty*, 2013. Installation view. Photograph: Dan Auluk.

Through working in this way, alongside and between my painting practice, I began to consider how collaborative working could operate as not just a 'new' kind of conversation, but as a liminal conversation within/between/around my work; the sparks of interest and creativity in these

collaborations are borne of the slippages, overlaps and interstices between multiple practices, minds, and modes of making. Auluk explains his *modus operandi* thus:

I guess I am exploring how we communicate and interconnect by creating situations that generate conversations. I do this mainly through live exhibition making, performance, intervention, drawing, photography, video, and text-based works...These live reflexive collaborations explore experimental ways of (de)activating space(s) and enabling audience engagement; attempting to reveal multiple perspectives that interrogate how we, as individuals and groups, look and see differently.²²¹

The most ambitious of Auluk's projects to date I consider to be *'We Don't Talk Anymore 2'*, (Stryx, Birmingham, 2018); a residency involving 13 artists over a three week period, with the closing event held on Digbeth First Friday.²²² The residency was to provide a laboratory-esque setting for the artists involved (figures 32-35). Each artist was invited to bring in existing work or new materials, to embrace an ethos of experimentation and collaborative making – all without uttering a word.

It was chaotic – and I loved it.

It was during this residency that I began to formulate my thinking around the notion of the studio-as-laboratory, and to consider how reconceptualising the studio-setting in this way, could indeed provide new perspectives for both artist and audience to encounter and freshly understand the *making* of making. This residency is documented and included within this chapter as *Becoming#4*.

²²¹ Dan Auluk, in conversation, <https://www.danauluk.com/info> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

²²² Digbeth is long-regarded as the Artists Quarter in Birmingham, with many artist-led studio and independent exhibition spaces, galleries and project-spaces. "First Friday is all about giving the public the opportunity to try, see and experience new things. Every first Friday of the month, the area of Digbeth comes alive with exhibitions, late-night openings, special events, culture in unexpected spaces, live music, street food and more". <https://www.whatsonlive.co.uk/news/digbeth-first-friday-highlights> [Accessed 20 July 2021].

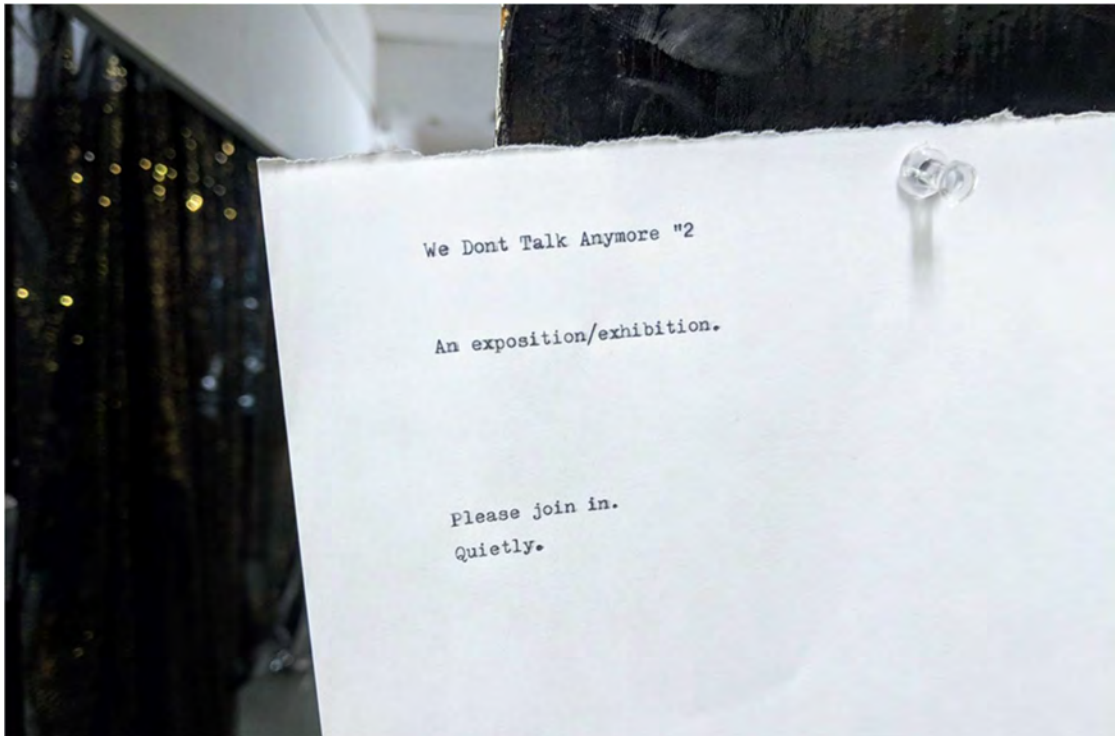


Figure 63 Sally Bailey, *Please Join In*, 2018. A4 paper, manual typewriter, pushpin. installation view.



Figure 64 WDTA2, 2018. installation view. Photograph: Dan Auluk.



Figure 65 WDTA2, 2018. installation view. Photograph: Sally Bailey.



Figure 66 WDTA2, 2018. installation view. Photograph: Sally Bailey.

I consider these collaborative projects as one singular strand of my multi-stranded, multi-dimensional painting practice. This singular strand, however, weaves its own path through the fabric of my whole practice, into spaces and places that I had not imagined, showing me new ways of working, thinking and making long after the initial collaboration is deemed closed. Collaboration is borne out of conversation, it becomes its own dialogue, and those conversations are then carried forward in thinking well beyond the life of the project.

The collaborative projects that I have been involved in myself have been many and varied – and have not often required paint. My own contributions have included performance, text, storytelling, collage, and filmmaking, but whatever the process or combination of methods, all have required a ‘painterly’ approach. This painterly approach to collaboration alludes to the physical connection and passages of movement, the back and forth and push and pull of painting transposed onto other ways of making; drawing on the inner forces of being in order to forge new connections, new conversations and ignite new thinking.

Of his own experience of collaborative performance interventions, the Puerto Rican artist Guillermo Calzadilla writes on the inevitable fragility of such events:

Collaboration is temporal and provisional: there are moments when there is a reason for people to get together, but just as easily those bonds can dissolve it’s not fixed or guaranteed; its unstable and that’s what makes it dangerous, uncertain and beautiful too.²²³

It is this fragile-ness that underpins the strength and beauty of the collaborative conversation. It may not always ‘work’, but that makes it all the more fulfilling when it does.

Above all, the collaborative space is a space of interconnectedness, a space for conversation, and a ‘space of exchange’.

It makes things happen.

It functions as Be(com)ing.

²²³ De Wachter, E.M. (2017) *Co-Art: Artists on Creative Collaboration*. London: Phaidon Press Limited, p101.

Becoming #4

We Don't Talk Anymore 2

Place: Stryx, Minerva Works, Fazeley Street, Birmingham.

Date: 25th March - 6th April 2018

Aims: To participate in a group residency, leading to a collaborative physical performance. To develop emergent ideas around creative processes as a performed activity.

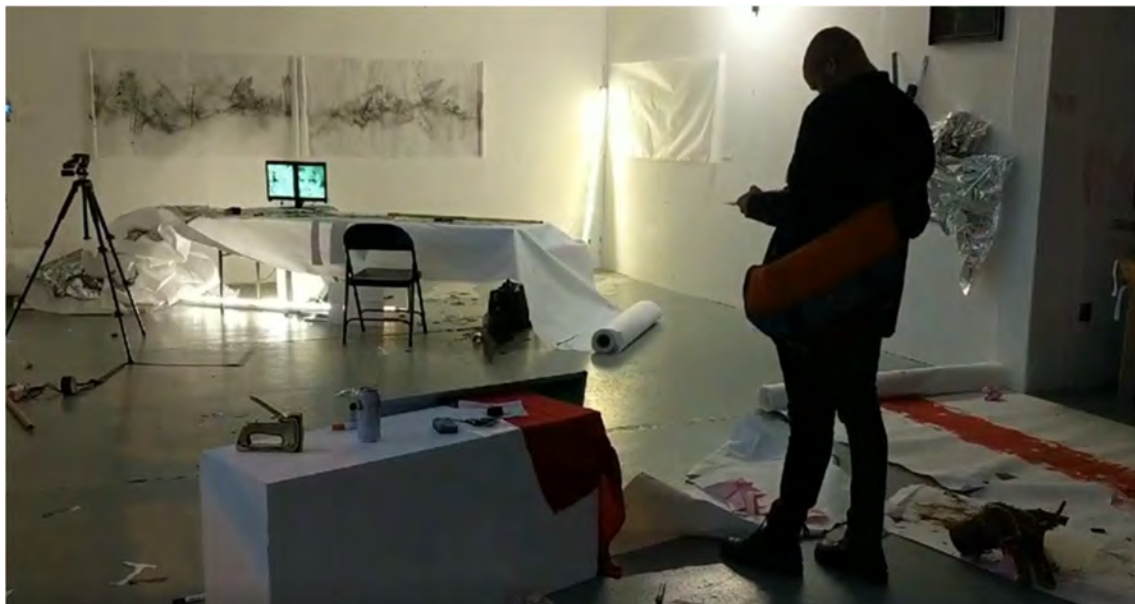


Figure 67 Stryx residency, *We Don't Talk Anymore II*. Installation view, 2018.

Event:

I participated in a three week-long residency at 'Stryx' (a Birmingham based artist-led studio and exhibition space) during April 2018, working with twelve other artists, under the watchful curatorial eye of Dan Auluk. The project was entitled *We Don't Talk Anymore 2*, and

this disparate group of artists came together to explore the dialogue created by making without talking; through mess and play, loud thinking and silent conversation. Each artist brought existing work into the experimental laboratory space, and new works were created from them; as our work blended and transformed, we used *making* as communication, *doing* instead of dialogue.

This exposition culminated in a collaborative physical performance which enabled the participants, both artist and audience, to consider how new experiences and ways of doing and seeing could be uncovered; not through conversation, but through shared activity and experience, through gesture and touch, through resonance and rhythm.

My own contribution to this experiment was to take a 50m painted banner, a residue from the Beyond Borders conference, and use this end-point from that performance as the start-point for this collaborative gathering of artists. I hung the repurposed banner in the studio space, and without words, encouraged those willing to collage on top of the 'painting'. This relinquishing of control over the process proved difficult and yet exhilarating; it brought different voices into the picture space, each one overlapping with the last and informing the next. There were no implicit rules, and a new work emerged quickly from the stickiness and the mess. I reflected that watching this process evolve was very much akin to the painting process itself; each mark changes the painting again, and again; there is theoretically no endpoint. Can there ever be an endpoint? Only if this process is executed over and over, until the last possible mark is made, determined as the moment of failure (and less often success) is reached.



Figure 68 Sally Bailey, *We Don't Talk Anymore II*. Performance view, Stryx residency, 2018.

Rather than feeling detached from this evolving piece (for it was no longer a painting, and was it ever a painting?), I am more invested than ever in what it can become. The seemingly chaotic juxtaposition of painting, found words, and borrowed images open a plethora of possibilities; the glue sticks are the messy intermediaries in this silent exploration of interconnectedness. As the imprint of my experiencing the painting dissipates, and a new multiple subjectivity reveals itself, I begin to consider how collage could potentially operate as a metaphor for 'research at the edge of chaos'.



Figure 69 Sally Bailey, *After/After Joan Jonas*. Collage on painted paper, 2018.

Perhaps this method of making and repurposing could in time be revealed as a crucial tool in the way I can gather and make 'sense' of the as yet unknown, and provide a fluid template to enable the threads of this research to connect into some previously unimagined robust structure?

Outcomes:

This body of work has led me to question again the historical primacy of the object in painting, and in the wider context of art production; even the phrase 'art production' is problematic, reinforcing the long-held view that the worth of art is measured by outcome, output and economic value. However, in this instance the 'value' of the work lies in the original painting, now concealed and repurposed, with no outward signification of the reason or risk attached to it. The newly collaged work appears whimsical and non-sensical; only I, as the painter, have experienced the point of transformation, the 'becoming' of this piece in the truest sense, and it is the process alone that has allowed this to happen.



Figure 70 Sally Bailey, fragment xii.

Postscript.

I was also commissioned to undertake three pieces of writing to document the event. The first piece of writing, produced to coincide with the public opening of the event, was printed onto pink A4 sheets of paper, and folded into paper aeroplanes. This art performance, *statement-aeroplane-sculpture*, instigated by Dan Auluk, disrupted the conventional codes of gallery viewing; the aeroplanes were handed out to visitors, who were encouraged to throw them during the opening performance.

One such plane is included for you to do the same.

We Don't Talk Anymore 2

The Opening Event

Nobody talks.

This was a space for collaborative making, for research and reflection. It was not a space for talking; other forms of communication had to be explored and developed or discarded. Things have happened in this space, things that have gone unseen and unspoken. Now it is time to look and think.

Still nobody talks.

Each artist brought work into the space, and new works developed alongside and in-between. A tangling and branching out of ideas enabled a merging and transforming to take place - this is research, and it feels dangerous. Dan Auluk, creator/curator, envisaged that this way of working could allow these artists to use making as a form of non-verbal communication, that the doing could become the dialogue, and that silence could become its own form of conversation. Are we looking at the future? A world without spoken words?

Still nobody talks.

Sarah Fortes-Mayer is the first artist to be encountered. She offers her hands, her gentle touch a silent communication. She whispers found words into your ear, and then retreats slowly. She will not be drawn into conversation; her job here is done. You are left with the found text, the only remnant of the coupling. It doesn't make any sense, and you venture forward.

Daniel Hopkins is heard before he is seen, producing highly experimental soundscapes that act as an intense backdrop to the event. The music is anxious and dark; penetrating sounds produced by playing guitar with saw and hammer, and anything else to hand, the sounds distorted and brutally projected into the darkness.

Alongside this Ana Rutter has sent postcards from the States; minute-long sound postcards with no words behind the pictures. There are no words.

Alex Billingham sits, wrapped in a silver foil blanket, looking at the postcards. It is a futile exercise since Billingham is blindfolded and unable to see. Perhaps they imagine what the words would say..but there are no words, and they cannot know that. They are a fragile and vulnerable figure amongst the moving obstacles in this space, but they continue their tentative exploration of the room, relying on the help of strangers to avoid harm. Theirs is a reduced world, senses deprived and human contact hard to engage. It is surely a warning.

Still nobody talks.

A pop-up laboratory setting sees Ian Andrews working furiously. With a considered and scientific approach, he translates the sounds in the room, recording his responses to the activity by drawing. An epic visual soundtrack remains; the frantic and fractured nature of the event captured in linear form. A screen flickers constantly in the background, seemingly instructions from another world.

The audience is invited to join Sally Bailey in collaging over a 50m long painting, adding new voices into the picture space. There are no rules here, just mess, stickiness, and play. Not everyone is comfortable with this freedom and some back away. Her typed text fragments litter the collage and the floor. These are lost words. Lost conversations that never began.

Jen der Fenda parades around the perimeter - her boxing-ring art exhibit/ion gender-fuck character bringing much needed glamour into the chaos and confusion. In gold hotpants and crumpled paper nipple covers, she carries her whiteboard aloft, conveying unspoken messages to the audience. She pauses often to swish her silken ponytail; her static poses acting as full-stops in this performed conversation.

The most poignant exhibit is by Jamie Cox. Four small blurry polaroid photographs show his late father; depicting intimate moments that can never be repeated but will always be remembered. Nearby are four postcards to accompany the photos, the typed text alluding to the possibility of a screenplay of the still images. A film that will never be filmed.

Vicky Roden quietly repairs the inevitable damage in this violent arena. Deftly stitching, quietly snipping, she asks for nothing in return. Remaking that which has been un/made, she mothers the motherless simian poppets. It is comforting to watch.

Still nobody talks.

For those willing to be initiated, Collective Unconscious offers a den of pleasure - the private room is intimate and warm, with sweet treats and sex toys laid out for selection. A written contract is drawn up, three interactions agreed and performed; experienced, but never discussed.

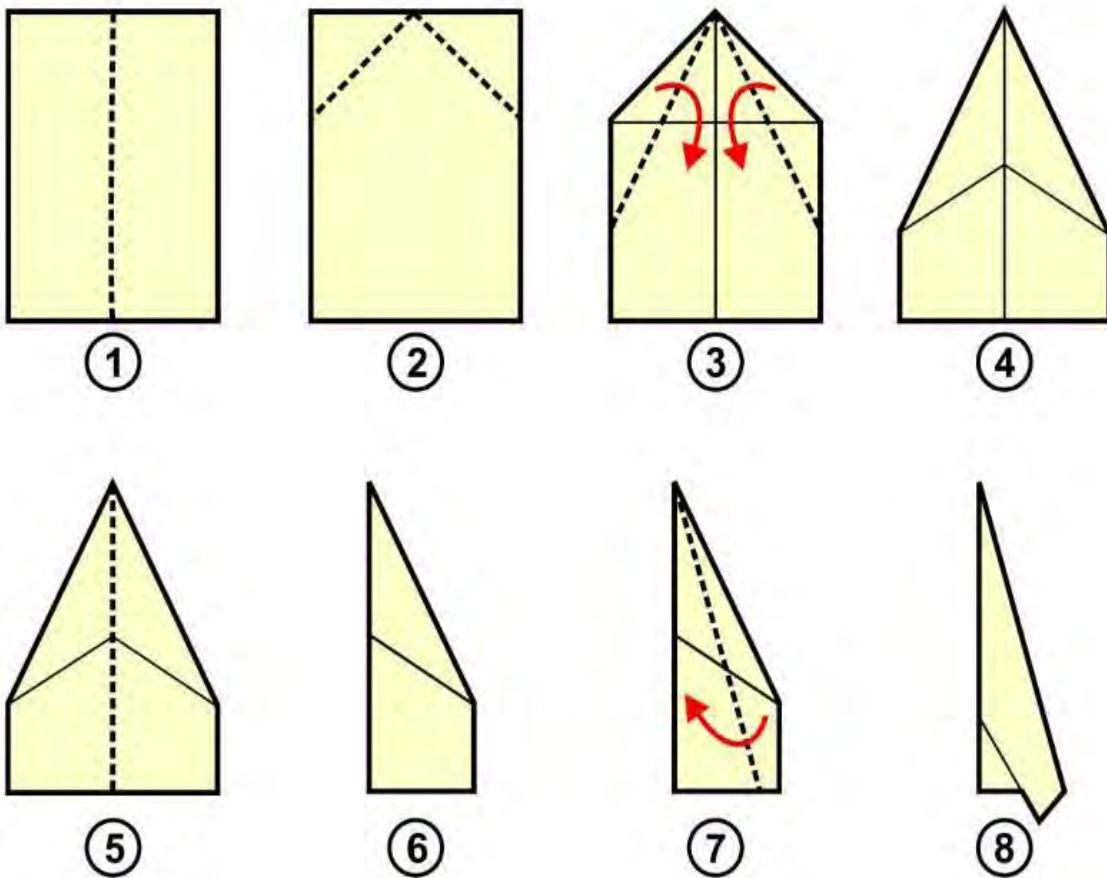
And in the furthest corner Oscar Cass-Darweish has installed a tiny camera that mostly goes unnoticed. The camera records a minute-long video, and replays it backwards on a website link, each minute erasing the previous minute, all context of time and place is lost. There are no words.

There are no more words.

We don't talk anymore.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE:

1. PRINT PAGE
2. FOLLOW FOLDING GUIDELINES BELOW
3. LAUNCH²²⁴



²²⁴ In the hard copy version of this thesis imagined for a pre-pandemic submission, a pre-printed and folded plane would have been included. Printed on light pink paper and thrown in the riotous company of others doing the same, it would offer an altogether different experience.

Chapter Six – Paradoxical Relationships

“One must not think slightingly of the paradoxical...for the paradox is the source of the thinker’s passion, and the thinker without a paradox is like a lover without feeling: a paltry mediocrity.”

Soren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments* (2014).

Locating the Liminal

Here I distil and share *exactly* how I envisage the liminal in the context of this research, and its possible implications on the way we may view, understand and experience painting. Through this process of distillation, I make my claim as to what this liminal space looks like, what it feels like, where it resides, and the potentials it contains.

This section of writing is the transcription of a conversation I have been having with myself for a very long time. For me, as a painter, painting can at times feel like a lonely and futile endeavour; theorising about painting practice often feels much the same. For at the end of the day the concepts I wrestle with are invisible and without form. I am trying to grasp something slippery that lies within, between and beyond.

paradox

To locate the liminal, and the 'space of exchange' within the painting process, is surely a paradoxical endeavour. For the liminal is formless, untouchable, unseeable – and yet somehow infinitely knowable. It resists definition at every turn; those who believe they encounter it, who *feel* it and emerge changed from it, cannot describe it in a language that we understand. Therefore, it would seem that the very act of attempting to define and locate a liminal space within the painting process instantly negates the very existence of it. There is a paradox in attempting to define some-*thing* that we cannot even explain. Each encountering of the liminal will differ from the next, my encounters will be different to yours. These are performative encounters, they cannot be scripted or fixed; we cannot capture these experiences, we cannot engineer them, or repeat them – and we can only know them fleetingly. As Susan Broadhurst writes: "the rules are created on each occasion and can in no way be determined beforehand...judgements need to be revised on every occasion, and no set judgement can exist".²²⁵

Turner also recognised this dilemma, but in his elaboration also stressed that, although slippery as a concept, it was important to acknowledge that to be receptive to what he called the 'chaos' of the liminal could also be the threshold to new knowledge:

²²⁵ Broadhurst, S. (1999) *Liminal Acts: A Critical Overview of Contemporary Performance and Theory*. London: Cassell Publications, p19.

Liminality can perhaps be described as a fructile chaos, a fertile nothingness, a storehouse of possibilities, not by any means a random assemblage, but a striving after new forms and structure.²²⁶

I contend that the liminal is not a physical *thing* or mapped place; it cannot be seen, shaped, or replicated. It is an event, a singularity in the purest sense, an abstract idea within our own thought processes. It is formed from a set of characteristics; qualities that, in combination, can produce an infinite number of interpretations, understandings and experiences. And this too is problematic; it is too easy to appropriate the concept of liminality without defining the parameters of application, since the liminal can be (and historically has been) used to signify such a broad and diverse spectrum of meaning and experience. Thomassen, whose writings were considered in Chapter One, concludes that it is critically important therefore 'to invite a reflexive use of the term, rooted in its intellectual and anthropological history, with due stress on the concepts of experience and transition',²²⁷ a statement that resonates with my own shaping of this transformative concept.

The eminent French composer, Claude Debussy, is alleged to have declared that "music is the space between the notes",²²⁸ a declaration that resonates with my own theories relating to the inter-connections between the painting process and the liminal. For although the liminal in this context embodies the essence of that which is 'between', its importance to the structure of the *w/whole* is fundamental; again, I refer to Schor's notion of *w/whole* as discussed in Chapter Two. Schor's concept is useful to understand that all structures (physical, philosophical, societal, etc) are fabricated from both the tangible, and the intangible spaces – the between. As with Debussy's observation, it is these between spaces that cohere the whole.

fertile spaces

The writings of Mira Schor, and specifically Schor's notion of '*terrains vague*' have been key to this research, since my initial encounter with this concept was the spark that initially ignited my ambition for this project, and through which I was able to utilise the fragile membranes that shape our being to explore the permeable boundaries of the liminal within the painting process.

'Terrains vague' is a French phrase that commonly describes the barren, scruffy, weed-infested areas found in all urban spaces - the forgotten and uninhabited 'between' spaces of the cityscape. Schor relates this concept of '*terrains vague*' to the process and function of painting:

²²⁶ Turner, V. (1996) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*. London: Aldine Transaction, p11-12.

²²⁷ Thomassen, B. (2014) *Liminality and The Modern: Living Through the In-Between*, London: Ashgate Publishing, p7.

²²⁸ Although these words are oft cited, there remains no reference or documentation to confirm authenticity.

‘Terrains vagues’, spaces of waves, the sea of liquidity, where the eye flows idly and unconstructed, uninstructed. These spaces are vague, not vacant... In such interstices painting lives, allowing entry at just these points of “imperfection”, of neglect between figure/ground... Paintings are vague terrains on which paint, filtered through the human eye, mind, and hand, flickers in and out of representation, as figure skims ground, transmitting thought.²²⁹

Schor claims that these ‘vague’ between-spaces of the cityscape are not unpopulated and barren, they are perhaps hidden openings to another world. And here I consider this notion of ‘terrains vague’ as relating to the liminal within the painting process; no longer referring to the cityscape, this is instead an invisible, fertile space where painting and Painting *become*.

Schors’ seminal book, *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*,²³⁰ was considered ground-breaking at the time, and indeed remains provocative today; it is important to acknowledge that this text has furnished me with the building blocks for this research, to appreciate their usefulness in providing structure, and to take this notion forward through my own thinking. As an example, it is interesting that Schor describes the process of painting as one filtered through the vision, the thinking, and the physical movement of the painter²³¹; I also consider that this process is embodied, and the outcome manifests itself as a physical re/presentation of those processes. However, to further build on these ideas it is interesting to consider layering this with the more recent writings of Laura Marks on the concept of ‘haptic visuality’ and examine how this could give further insight into the processes involved in creative production, and how this relates to notions of the liminal in those between spaces.

Although writing in relation to the cinematic and the intercultural, Laura Marks theory of ‘haptic visuality’²³² has much to offer in unravelling the conundrums of the liminal, the embodied process of painting, notions of transformation, and *Becoming*. Just as language alone cannot adequately convey knowledge and ideas, Marks argues that visuality must be understood as multisensory, and enhanced by the tactile senses in particular²³³. Her theories build on those of Henri Bergson²³⁴, and Deleuze and Guattari²³⁵ to redefine the role of all the senses in relation to cinema and spectatorship. Contrary to logic and instinct, Marks suggests that the ‘proximal senses’,²³⁶ those of smell, touch and feeling, are of higher value than the normative (in relation to the cinematic) ‘distal senses’ of hearing and seeing.

²²⁹ Schor, M. (1997) *Wet: On Painting, Feminism, and Art Culture*. London: Duke University Press, p155.

²³⁰ Ibid.

²³¹ Ibid.

²³² Marks, L.U. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses*. London: Duke University Press.

²³³ Ibid, p129

²³⁴ Henri Bergson (1859-1941) was arguably one of the most influential French philosophers. His belief that perception and memory were multisensory set the stage for those that came after to develop theories of the haptic. Taken from *Bergson: Key Writings*, ed. Keith Pearson & John Mullarkey. London: Continuum (2002).

²³⁵ Deleuze & Guattari write on the distinction between the haptic and optic in relation to nomad art in the seminal work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (p577).

²³⁶ Marks, L.U. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses*. London: Duke University Press, p187.

Marks considers that these proximal senses are primarily those that awaken our latent memories and thus evoke a widened sensorial field of visibility²³⁷. However, Marks is also careful to iterate that no single sense is primary over another, for it is the utilisation and combination of the senses that is important here, since memory is embedded in *all* our senses²³⁸. Considering intercultural cinema, Marks writes:

I posit an epistemology that uses touch, rather than vision, as its model for knowledge...I go on to suggest that if vision can be understood as embodied, touch and other senses necessarily play a part in vision. I argue that, since memory functions multisensorially, a work of cinema, though it only directly engages two senses, activates a memory that necessarily involves all the senses.²³⁹

A haptic visibility, as Marks defines it, has perhaps always been inadvertently applied in other areas of art production, where all the senses are necessarily utilised in making; in textile arts or ceramics, for instance, the 'distal senses' of hearing and seeing alone are simply inadequate. I suggest that this strategy of haptic visibility can indeed, when utilised to consider how painting is viewed, allow for a heightened and embodied understanding of the material nature that visibility can encompass.

I put forward that this notion of haptic visibility is a valuable tool in understanding how, within the liminal, the painter can harness an expanded way of seeing/thinking/feeling/making/being; it enables us to 'look' beyond the surface image re/presented, to penetrate it, sense it, feel it – to *experience* the painter's vision made visible. As Emma Cocker notes:

There are forms of seeing which do not belong to the ocular realm, visions produced by experimental means. Some things cannot be viewed directly; sometimes you have to look away. Seeing shadows requires a degree of blindness to the light.²⁴⁰

Allowing this 'layering' of looking, thinking, feeling and affect, this bringing together of fragments to create, expand, or make sense of our own burgeoning ideas, is a useful tool to consider. For when we cannot locate an existing theoretical framework that allows our thinking to 'fit', and therefore develop and grow, we must initially look outside the established and acknowledged modes of thinking (in relation to this project, outside of the traditional realm of painting), and unashamedly 'borrow' from elsewhere. This borrowed structure, akin to a trellis perhaps, can then be used to support these fragile tendrils of thought until they find their own way, and can stand unsupported.

²³⁷ Ibid, p22

²³⁸ Marks, L.U. (2000) *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and The Senses*. London: Duke University Press, p22.

²³⁹ Ibid.

²⁴⁰ Cocker, E. (2013) Tactics for Not Knowing: Preparing for The Unexpected. In: *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think*, Fisher, E. & Fortnum, R. (eds). London: Black Dog Publishing, p128.

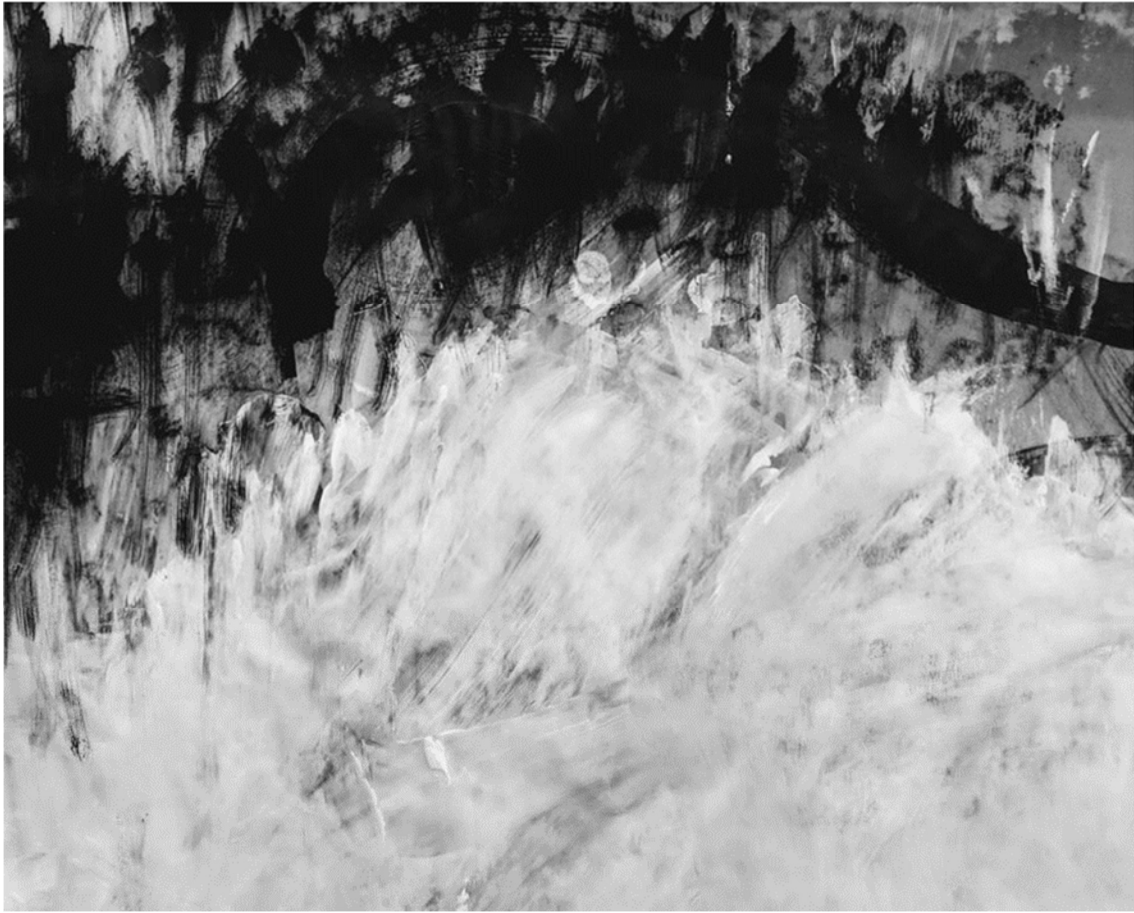


Figure 71 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Terrains Vague)*, oil on board, 50cm x 50cm, 2019.

space/place

In re-imagining where the liminal could be located, and what it 'is', questions surrounding the dialectic division of space and place become pertinent. Historically the liminal is referred to as a 'space' – imagined as a deconceptualized waiting-space, a neutral and formless space that is itself of no tangible value given that it is the *things contained within* (subject, experience, potential for transformation) that are deemed to be of significance.

What are the possible implications of repositioning the liminal as a defined 'place'? To conceive of it as a physical place; tangible, intuited and safely familiar? Or could the liminal be better conceived as a 'site'; a living and expanding place of construction, knowledge and growth, a *terrains vague*?

To begin to unravel this dilemma and reconstruct a defined notion of location, I refer to the writings of Yi-Fu Tuan, an eminent Geographer, whose renowned book *'Space and Place: The Perspective of*

Experience' continues to influence far beyond the discipline for which it was written some 25 years ago. His writings raise very interesting debate around notions of space and place, still relevant today, and examines how we think about and encounter space and place, and how those experiences are affected by the temporal:

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value. Eventually what was a strange town and unknown space becomes a familiar place. Abstract space, lacking significance other than strangeness, becomes concrete place, filled with meaning. Much is learned, but not through formal introduction.²⁴¹

This is an important notion when reimagining the liminal and its location - for similarly to other binaric notions (such as those of past/present, inside/outside, life/death, self/other), the subjects of 'space' and 'place' require each other in order to be shaped and defined. Our understanding, experience, and visualisation of one, will inherently depend on and be coloured by our understanding, experience and visualisation of the other.

Tuan also considers our natural wariness of the unknown or the undefined in relation to our responsiveness to the new, and that space cannot become place until it is completely familiar to us. But that familiarity is hard-won:

People tend to suppress that which they cannot express. If an experience resists ready communication, a common response of the 'doer' is to deem it private – even idiosyncratic – and hence unimportant.²⁴²

Tuan does not shy away from discussing the transition of space-to-place in more aggressive terms – notably in terms of territorialisation. He suggests that a space becomes 'place' when it is fenced off, physically or metaphorically, and vigorously defended from outsiders.²⁴³ This place, to those who inhabit it, then becomes a 'safe place', one of security, shared values, and conformity. A place of safety to be guarded fiercely. To transgress the borders of this safe place, is to transgress the accepted values that it embodies, and those that do so risk being cast back out to the 'space' beyond.

Doreen Massey calls for a new understanding of space, arguing that space is not a 'closed system',²⁴⁴ but one of possibilities and potentials:

Because space...is a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded in material practices which have to be carried out, it is always in the process of being made. It

²⁴¹Tuan, Y-F. (2018) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* USA: University of Minnesota Press, p199.

²⁴² Ibid, p62.

²⁴³ Ibid.

²⁴⁴ Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage Publications, p9.

is never finished; never closed. Perhaps we could imagine space as a simultaneity of stories-so-far.²⁴⁵

Massey considers that it is productive to consider space differently; space is always in a state of being made, and therefore always unfinished – and this quality of unfinishedness affords a *space* within the space for those stories to unfold. She concludes that “this is a space of loose ends and missing links. For the future to be open, space must be open too”.²⁴⁶

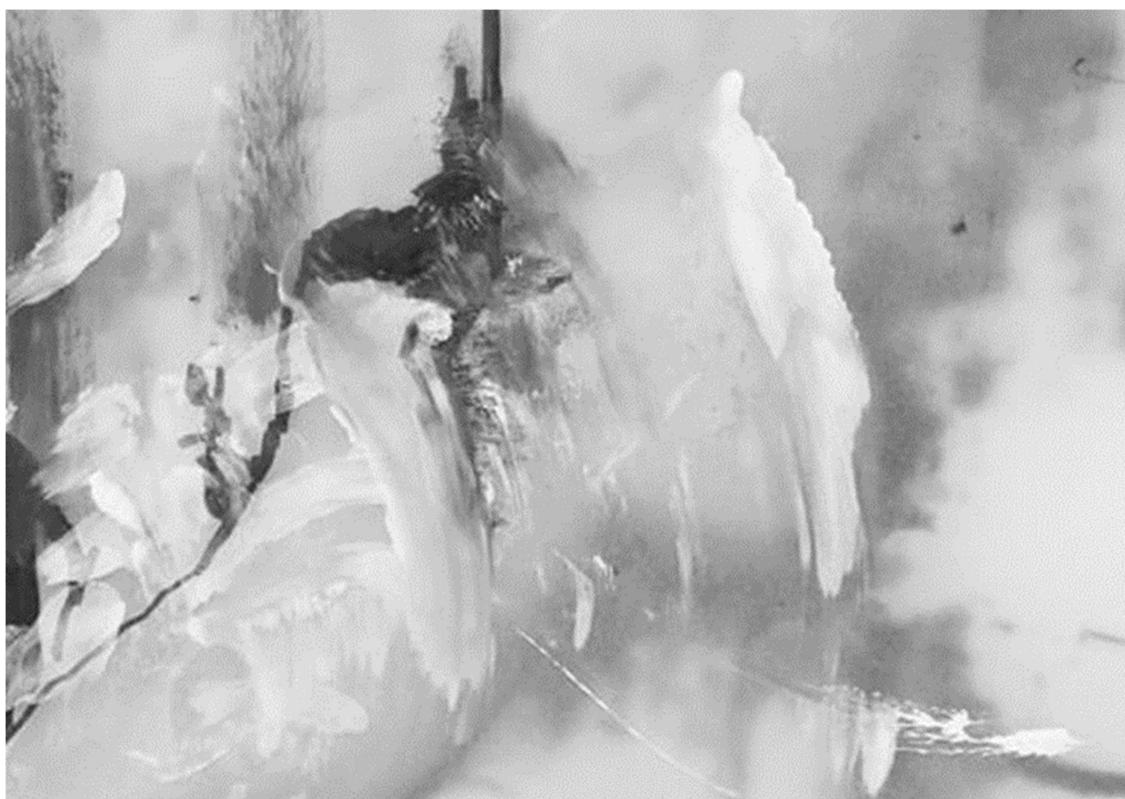


Figure 72 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Fragment)*, 2019. Oil on vellum.

It could be argued that Tuans’ concept of space/place settles in a broad understanding of ‘place’ as representing security, and ‘space’ as representing freedom, which I argue now becomes problematic, since artistic process ultimately requires embodying freedom (to express and exploit creativity) over security. Surely then, the liminal within the painting process must therefore be considered as ‘space’ – unconstrained, without borders, free and limitless? It is not a physical location and cannot be mapped as such; the liminal (in the context of this research) is, I am beginning to conclude, is a space

²⁴⁵ Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London: Sage Publications, p9.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid*, p12

that can be felt, intuited and explored - but only if the painter is receptive to this notion. Again, these are murky waters that we attempt to navigate.

Perhaps, and equally perhaps not, of use to resolve this paradox of space/place in relation to the liminal, is Tuans' thoughts on mythical space – for is this musing on the liminal not bordering precariously on constructed fabulation? Tuan writes:

Myth is often contrasted with reality. Myths flourish in the absence of precise knowledge. Mythical space is a fuzzy area of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known: it becomes pragmatic space.²⁴⁷

But is the liminal space only a myth? Or does it reside in an in-between space/place, a half-way house between myth and reality? For I argue that these notions cannot be reduced to the black and white of space/place, myth/reality, security/freedom – the very existence of the liminal is necessary to give voice and presence to these places and spaces in-between – the '*terrain vagues*', the slippages and interstices, where the *magic* happens, but only if you believe (or are willing to suspend disbelief) in magic.

As we get nearer to understanding (if still not grasping) the liminal and considering what it can offer in terms of understanding and experiencing creative practice, it quickly slips further away. I put forward that to locate the liminal, we must de-mythicise it, and instead imbue the space it occupies with tacit knowledge. To achieve this aim, we must allow ourselves to be intimate with this liminal space/place, for it is a private encounter of experience – we do not need to 'see' it, to find it, to hold it, we simply need to embrace the thought of it, to abandon our creative processes to the possibility of it, and to relish the sensation of its generative potential.

It is necessary to also consider the liminal in relation to temporality. Following Tuan as I previously discussed, time and our multiple understandings of time, will in turn influence our interpretation of the liminal space/place. For concepts such as these are rarely static entities – they are invariably changed as time elapses, as new knowledge emerges to reshape or reimagine them. And is it here that the liminal sits? Not as a smooth unravelling or revealing of potential, but a rupturing, a mutation, a birthing – an experiential process that cannot be expressed in language alone. It enables the indeterminate, the possible, the impossible, and the randomness of chance encounters. The liminal space is characterised by a layering – overlapping materially, temporally, spatially and between.

To further complicate this tangle of thinking, Celia Lury, writing on the liminal in relation to the sociology of research methods, asks us to consider whether there is only one central liminal space –

²⁴⁷ Tuan, Y-F. (2018) *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*, USA: University of Minnesota Press, p86.

or multiples -"many middles to be worked in, worked up, and worked out."²⁴⁸ This question is critically important; as a concept, liminality is multi-dimensional, and multi-faceted, so does it not make sense that on our journey we may encounter multiple sites of the liminal? I put forward that it is how we contend with this multiplicity of co-temporal moments that will determine the outcome. This notion is identified by Deleuze and Guattari as the 'intermezzo'.²⁴⁹

This middle is by no means an average; on the contrary, it is where things pick up speed. *Between* things does not designate a localizable relation going from one thing to the other and back again, but a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps up one *and* the other way, a stream without beginning or end that undermines its banks and picks up speed in the middle.²⁵⁰

To consider the liminal as existing intermezzo, leads me again to conclude this concept is indeed one of space, and not place. The liminal remains resolutely unfamiliar, unpredictable, and unmappable; the journey towards, through and between these liminal spaces is never straightforward or steerable.

The attempt to locate the liminal has indeed been a circular journey.

reimagining

Until relatively recently, the relationship of the work of art practice and the work of research itself was thought to a paradoxical one, and yet today we are able to understand that art practice itself can indeed be considered as research, without needing further explanation or justification; the 'doing' alone can be understood as a mode of inquiry and as knowledge-generating. Illustrating that paradoxical relationships can, through time, come to be acknowledged, understood, and accepted; paradoxical relationships can thrive to the point that they are no longer considered to be paradoxes at all.

²⁴⁸ Black, L. & Puwar, N. (2013) *Live Methods*. London: Blackwell Publishing, p3.

²⁴⁹ Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (2012) *A Thousand Plateaus*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, p26.

²⁵⁰ Ibid, p26.

So here I reimagine the liminal.

It is not an object, or a being.

It is not a mappable place, or a planned destination.

It is not fabulation or myth.

It is not something that can be measured, quantified, or replicated.

It is a set of characteristics, of qualities.

It is a way of 'knowing', a mode of understanding.

It is a meditative quiet place.

It is a state of being, and of becoming.

It is a space of exchange.

And this is perhaps the breakthrough; I thought I was looking for the liminal, but perhaps I was looking for something that embodied the *characteristics* and *potentiality* of the liminal. Not the liminal space as is traditionally considered a waiting space, a threshold to be transgressed when the time is right. The subject in this liminal space, distinct from the Gennep/Turner subjects encountering the liminal space as a rite of passage, is not merely waiting for change – but is actively seeking that change, instigating that metamorphosis. This version of the liminal is one that also provides a safe place for contemplation, for experimentation and transgression - to bring about alchemical, transubstantive happenings within that space for both the painter and the process of painting.

And so here, I put forward, sits the liminal; its characteristics encompassed within and between this 'space of exchange', to be encountered and enacted, to be lived. This space is not a mythical or mystical space, but a space of *change*, as well as *exchange*; sometimes painful, incomprehensible, lonely and barren – at other times joyful, uplifting and empowering.

I conclude that the liminal *is* the 'space of exchange'.

Painting as Performative Process

paradox

To consider the processes of painting as performed and/or performative does indeed seem paradoxical, for (most) painters pursue painting as a very solitary activity, sharing little of their process, of material or thought, until the final artefact is displayed. The many marks and traces of the making-journey are untraceable between the layers of paint, homogenised on the surface of the canvas.

The origins of the term ‘performative’ are attributed to J.L. Austin, author of the renowned book *‘How to Do Things with Words’*.²⁵¹ Here Austin makes the distinction between what he describes as “performative utterances”²⁵² and “constative utterances”.²⁵³ He defines constative utterances as statements limited to describing phenomena, whereas performative utterances do not merely describe or repeat actions and events – they *perform* the actions to which they refer. His oft-cited example of the words ‘I do’ spoken during a marriage ceremony, amply illustrate how verbalising the action can become the action, since speaking those words aloud during the ceremony transforms the marital status of the person voicing those words instantly.

Subsequent theorists have expanded Austin’s notion of the performative speech act to include performed events, physical processes, and actions. These events cause ‘something’ to come into being, something that did not exist before the performative act; for example, in the performed act of painting, if the performative potential can be realised, the artefact of painting-as-object, and the painter-as-subject are the likely outcomes. Here I argue that unravelling the entanglement of painting and the performative is critical to this research; I put forward that the act of painting *can* itself be interpreted as a performative event, and as a performed line of enquiry. These are the processes of painting laid strikingly bare; I explore the performative and performed actions in relation to painting and consider how an understanding of this process could indeed offer new ways to encounter, view, and experience painting.

In transposing the concept of the performative onto the painting process, the question I consider is this: how can we reconcile this paradox of considering the process of painting in this way, and how could it contribute to our understanding of painting? I also suggest that not all paradoxes can, or should, be reconciled; for this research is re-imagining the liminal in relation to painting. Painting

²⁵¹ Austin, J. L. (1962) *How to Do Things With Words*. London: Oxford University Press.

²⁵² *Ibid*, p6.

²⁵³ *Ibid*, p3.

‘becomes’ within, between and through these slippages, hic-coughs, and gaps; if this paradox is reconciled, it may cease to be a liminal space at all. It is this very frisson between that enables the existence and function of the liminal, and without it, the ‘space of exchange’ within is lost.

Questions also arise as to whether the notion of the painting process understood as performative event has the ability to change how we consider painting – both as process and as object – even if we, as the viewer, do not witness the performative process itself? I contend that the performative nature of the painting process does not need to be witnessed by anyone other than the painter. The performative action causes *something* to come into being that did not exist before; the painting-as-object comes into being at the moment of be(com)ing within the ‘space of exchange’. However, whilst not privy to the spectacle of the event, this does not preclude the viewer from seeking an understanding of that process, which in turn can affect the encounter with the painting-as-object. For the processes of presencing and be(com)ing will inevitably be embodied in the work of painting (be that ‘finished’ or ‘in progress’), experienced by the painter, and encountered by the viewer. And it is the *exposition* of that process, as discussed in Chapter Four, the revealing and sharing of modes of making and knowledge production, that the ‘inner world’ of painting can become more readily accessible to the viewer.

informe

In considering how this paradox of defining something so slippery could be better considered, I was grateful to uncover the writings of Georges Bataille, and his notion of ‘*L’informe*’. This is a term included in his *Critical Dictionary*, published in the French journal ‘*Documents*’ in 1929²⁵⁴. *L’informe* is a term adopted by Bataille to describe the form/less; any identified ‘moment’ which eludes definition and is purely performative. Working towards an understanding of Bataille’s work has enabled me to make sense of that which at times has seemed sense-less; it is useful to consider that some things lie beyond articulation, and are expressed, encountered and understood in other ways.

The Critical Dictionary itself exists as a paradoxical endeavour also, since it is a dictionary offering definitions of the supposedly *undefinable* – here defined as something that exists as a ‘thing’, an activity, or event that cannot be wholly described or explained. It instead could be argued to be a thing that exists purely in the performative moment, to be grasped via the performative encounter. Projecting this forward into considering the forces contained within the painting process, I suggest that only the painter, as subject, can therefore experience this ‘thing’ – *l’informe* - the undefinable as the transubstantive moment, the instant of transcendence, and the ambiguous potential of the

²⁵⁴ Arya, R. (2014) *The Formless*. In *Abjection and Representation*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p119.

liminal. The painter is the facilitator and sole author of this performative act; it is through this performative act that painter and Painting come into being.

Reigniting interest in Bataille's original concept, cultural theorists Yves-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss²⁵⁵ drew on this notion of 'l'informe' to argue that artists throughout the twentieth century, namely the abstract expressionists and post-modernists, have used this idea of formlessness as a mode of heightening creativity. They used this theory "not to elevate art, but to get down and dirty".²⁵⁶ This is evidenced most clearly in the work of Jackson Pollock, which is considered later in this chapter, and Gunter Brus (figure 38).



Figure 73 Gunter Brus, *Selbstbemalung* (Self-Painting), 1964. Photograph: gelatin silver print, 59 x 49cms. Owned by the Horace W Goldsmith Foundation.

²⁵⁵ This notion was explored and presented in the 1996 exhibition, *Formless: A Users Guide*, Pompidou Centre, Paris.

²⁵⁶ <https://www.tate.org/uk/art/art-terms/formlessness> [Accessed 5 July 2012].

Brus, an Austrian artist working between performance, film, and painting, was a highly controversial figure. His notorious 1968 performance, *'Kunst & Revolution'*, a radical performance which the artist claimed was a reaction against the legacy of Nazi fascism in Austria, saw Brus drinking his own urine until he vomited, and masturbating in public. He was unsurprisingly arrested during the performance, and subsequently spent six months in prison.²⁵⁷

as research

Brad Haseman, in his ground-breaking essay, *A Manifesto for Performative Research*²⁵⁸, links the notion of the performative to a new possibility for validating arts-based research. Putting forward his concept of Performative Research, Haseman afforded recognition to the difficulty many artists face in finding methodologies that can both satisfy the Academy and allow the artist to present their practice as the research. Haseman claimed that this new research paradigm could bring into being a new understanding of undiluted²⁵⁹ artistic practice as a valid research methodology. In fact, he claimed that this approach could be considerably more successful in presenting practice as research since it allowed for a 'double articulation'²⁶⁰ of the research intentions.

When research findings are presented as performative utterances, there is a double articulation with practice that brings into being what, for want of a better word, it names. The research process inaugurates movement and transformation. It is performative. It is not qualitative research: it is itself – a new paradigm of research with its own distinctive protocols, principles, and validation procedures²⁶¹

Haseman is offering here a solution to the tricky relationship between practice as research and a traditional academic framework that relies largely on a qualitative approach. However, Barbara Bolt, in her examination of Haseman's theories and subsequent adaptations of it²⁶² advises caution, noting that the term 'performative' has over time become all-pervasive in many areas of practice-led research – often used out of context, confusing performance for performativity, and making pre-emptive assumptions about predicted outcomes.²⁶³ Whilst there are many commonalities between performance and the performative, since both are embodied processes and models for knowledge

²⁵⁷ <http://www.artnet.com/artists/gunter-brus> [Accessed 17 July 2021]

²⁵⁸ Haseman, B. (2006). A Manifesto for Performative Research. *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, theme issue "Practice-led Research"(no. 118): pp. 98-106.

²⁵⁹ Undiluted in the sense that the practice stands alone as research, without the additional requirement of a written exegesis to validate it as such.

²⁶⁰ Haseman, B. (2006). A Manifesto for Performative Research. *Media International Australia incorporating Culture and Policy*, theme issue "Practice-led Research"(no. 118): pp. 98-106.

²⁶¹ Ibid.

²⁶² Bolt, B. (2016) Artistic Research: A Performative Paradigm. In *PARSE Issue 3: Repetitions and Reneges*.

<https://www.parsejournal.com/article/artistic-research-a-performative-paradigm/> [Accessed 29 June 2021]

²⁶³ Ibid.

production, it is wise to consider that all performance events are not necessarily performative. And, I argue therefore, it follows that not all performative occurrences are necessarily performed; some things are not ours to see.

Bolt argues that it is problematic to assume that just because a practice '*brings into being that which it names*',²⁶⁴ that this constitutes the essence of the performative. Taking the painting process as my example, the painter engages in performing the action of painting – but the creation of painting-as-object from this process does not automatically invoke the performative. For the painting process to be considered as a performative event, I will put forward that the painter must acknowledge an experiencing of the 'space of exchange' and the process of transformation contained therein - the experiencing and embodying of a performative moment where those forces within the present separate into painter and painting, and they emerge into Being.

ritual

The performative event can also be considered in terms of existing within the liminal, since a performative dimension can also be identified in rituals and ritualistic behaviours, such as the enactment of ceremonies and rites of passage²⁶⁵. This makes sense to me as a painter, since I consider the painting process and the rituals performed (from material preparations, the donning of a paint-stained apron, the selection of paints and favourite brushes, to the music in the background – every painter will have their own set of rituals) to be indexical and embodied. The process of painting, through the rituals performed within, in turn becomes a performative utterance. To describe in words what happens within the painting process is near-on impossible – but perhaps by enacting the process as a performative event, the communication of the unsayable is made possible, and the painter is able to convey meaning through that movement. As Parker and Sedgwick comment in the introduction to their book, *Performativity and Performance*,²⁶⁶ this is a breakthrough:

As a certain stress has been lifted momentarily from the issues that surround being something, an excitingly charged and spacious stage seems to open up for explorations of that even older, even newer question, of how saying something can be doing something.²⁶⁷

I return briefly to the notion of frontstage/backstage; for within the painting process, I argue that the

²⁶⁴ Ibid.

²⁶⁵ Timothy Carson (in *Liminal Reality and Transformational Power*) considers that these ritualistic behaviours, exhibited during rites of passage ceremonies, act as an interpretive key to the understanding of that culture and society. The ritual functions to "create solidarity, negotiate or repress either change or conflict, and define reality itself." (p4)

²⁶⁶ Parker, A. & Kosofsky-Sedgwick, E. eds. (1995) *Performativity and Performance*. London: Routledge.

²⁶⁷ Ibid, p16.

performative utterance that brings painting into being occurs within the arena of the backstage; within the studio-as-laboratory this performative event is invoked, witnessed and felt only by the painter.

The notion of performativity in relation to painting emerges from the post-war era, from Abstract Expressionism and all that it encompassed. The acclaimed art critic Harold Rosenberg is, alongside Clement Greenberg, widely credited with bringing Abstract Expressionism into the mainstream of American post-war painting, and also for defining an off-shoot art form that moved painting completely away from the representational, and towards a focus of the physical 'doing'²⁶⁸ of the process. This art form Rosenberg termed 'Action Painting'; he declared that the canvas was no longer a static support for the craft of painting but had instead become "an arena in which to act"²⁶⁹, and that "what would go onto the canvas was not a picture, but an event."²⁷⁰

Artists including Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, and Franz Kline produced incredibly energetic works, characterised by a sense of spontaneity, physicality, and freedom of expression. Photographic images showing these artists at work were widely published, affording the viewer perhaps the first glimpse of this painterly process in *action* – which was critical, since these artists considered that the act of painting, and the synergy of artist and materials within the process, was as significant (and arguably more important) than the object produced. Hans Namuth's photographs of Pollock are iconic (figures 39); often standing on top of the enormous canvasses spread over the studio floor, Pollock drips, pours, flicks, and throws paint across the surface. It is a theatrical performance, and the canvas is his stage. Pollock encapsulates, arguably for the very first time (via the photographic documentation of the event), the *performance* and the *performative* nature of painting, and of paint itself – and in doing so, exposes not only the process, but also the complexities of the relationships between painter and process, painter and object, and the viewer also.

However, Pollock is purposefully *performing* the performative, in effect re/staging the backstage as frontstage – and this can, I put forward, be considered problematic. For in the context of this research, deliberately performing the performative inhibits the painter in locating a 'space of exchange' and the potentials within. Interestingly, Amelia Jones, writing on body-art and a performative approach to the interpretation of the discipline, introduces her concept of the 'Pollockian Performative',²⁷¹ which tackles this very paradox. Jones makes the observation that Pollock, in these early studio photographs,

²⁶⁸ Not making, implying a polite passive activity, but doing – a physical instinctive involvement to effect change.

²⁶⁹ Rosenberg, H. (1982) *The American Action Painters*, Art News 51 (December 1952). Reprinted in H. Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New*. Chicago: Chicago University press, p23-39.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Jones, A. (1998) *Body art: Performing the Subject*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, p55.

can be considered both *in* performance, and *as* the performative event, and she names this phenomenon the Pollockian Performative. She writes:

Pollock is a subject that is potentially dispersed, dislocated and open to spectatorial engagement...the Pollockian Performative can productively be viewed as signalling a profound philosophical shift in conceptions of artistic subjectivity (and subjectivity itself).²⁷²



Figure 74 Jackson Pollock in the studio. Photograph by Hans Namuth, 1950.

²⁷² Jones, A. (1998) *Body art: Performing the Subject*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, p55.

Jones considers here that Pollock, in the performative moment, ceases to be the Painter-as-subject, as he becomes absorbed by the forces of the process itself; elaborating that the roles of the painter, the viewer and the event/moment itself are utterly interchangeable (and exchangeable) in this performative happening.²⁷³ However, it is also important to acknowledge the tensions existing around this notion of the Pollockian Performative, since historically the tropes of the 'painter' in this movement are always portrayed as inevitably masculinist/masculine/gendered. As Jones observes:

Pollock's normative (if somewhat hyperbolic) masculinity, insistently reiterated by modernist discourse, draws its power from the specific tropes of American manhood codified in the post-World War II period.²⁷⁴

And whilst this explanation may no longer be relevant (or tolerated) today, it must be acknowledged that the immense scale and visible energies of Pollock's paintings drew the viewer into the experiencing of the painting process like never before; the viewer now transitioned from a purely spectatorial role to one of participatory-spectating of the performative moment. Allan Kaprow, a contemporary of Pollock, observed that:

To grasp Pollocks impact properly, one must be something of an acrobat constantly vacillating between an identification with the hands and body that flung the paint and 'stood' in the canvas and allowing the markings to entangle and assault one into submitting to their permanent and objective character...the artist, the spectator and the outer world are much too interchangeably involved here.²⁷⁵

Here Kaprow is tentatively approaching what Jones later positions as the 'Pollockian Performative', understanding that the boundaries between painter/painting/Painting/viewer are now permeable and transgress-able – all are intermediaries within this performative iteration of process.

²⁷³ Jones, A. (1998) *Body art: Performing the Subject*. USA: University of Minnesota Press, p59

²⁷⁴ *ibid* p77

²⁷⁵ Kaprow A. The Legacy of Jackson Pollock. In *Art News*: Volume 57, Oct 1958. p26.



Figure 75 Lee Krasner, *Shattered Color*, 1947. Oil on canvas.

It is now acknowledged that Lee Krasner, more recently recognised as contributing greatly to the abstract expressionist movement (figure 40), was producing drip-paintings well before Pollock himself;²⁷⁶ the small fact that she was married to Pollock underlining the masculinisation of the art world at that time. Krasner always felt that as a female artist, she had been overlooked, and had never been given the recognition she believed she had earned. But unable to influence this thinking directly, she nevertheless continued to paint long after Pollocks untimely death, aware of the irony that it was his fortune that enabled her to do so. She is quoted as saying: “I painted before Pollock, during Pollock, and after Pollock.”²⁷⁷

The later work of artist Helena Almeida (figure 41) also encompasses this notion of painting as a performative gesture and ritual. As an abstract painter, performance artist, and auto-photographer

²⁷⁶ Levin, G. (2019) Lee Krasner: A Biography. London: Thames & Hudson, p12.

²⁷⁷ Ibid, p19.

her work explored the thresholds between the canvas and the self; Almeida used her body as an extension of, or substitute for the canvas – enacting an obliteration of self within her process. In the image below, Almeida transforms the body of the artist into the painting. Of her process, Almeida considers:

I was my own work. There was no distinction between the canvas, the dimension of the canvas, and me. There was no distinction between inside or outside. My inner self was my outer self and my outer self was my inner self. ²⁷⁸

Like Pollock and so many of his contemporaries, Almeida also becomes another example of the ‘Pollockian Performative’, her work inhabited an in-between state, blurring the boundaries between disciplines, subjectivities, and spectacle. The performative images of her work can be considered simultaneously as painting, performance, and performative photograph.

²⁷⁸ Wood, C. (2012) *A Bigger Splash: Painting After Performance*. London, Tate Publishing, p17.



Figure 76 Almeida, H. *Estado Para un Enriquecimiento Interior*, photographic image, 1976.

Having established that not all performed actions are performative by default, it leads me to consider what I understand the essence of the performative to be in relation to the painting process. As a starting point for this thinking process, I return to the writing of Barbara Bolt, in her concluding statement that:

The aim of a performative paradigm is not to find correspondences but rather to recognise and ‘map’ the ruptures and movements that are created by creative productions. Here the work of art is not just the artwork/performance or event, but it is also the effect of the work in the material, affective and discursive domains.²⁷⁹

This I believe to be the crux of the matter: that for the painter to produce a Painting through a performed action, is not enough to claim that this is a performative event. For this to be so, there must be evidenced a level of affect experienced by painter, material process, and painting alike – a transformative instant of ‘be(com)ing’.

Shezad Dawood, artist, also writes about the notion of ‘Becoming’ in relation to the ‘performative moment’²⁸⁰, claiming the potentiality exists for a multiplicity of moments, and it is these combined moments, through a process of ‘Becoming’, that contain the possibility to create a new world. However, Dawood goes on to temper this ‘out-there’ statement with a warning that “here we start to enter the no-man’s land between narrative and fictional possibility”.²⁸¹

This is starting to feel like familiar territory to me.

And I begin to sense that performativity may indeed be a *path* leading to, and from, the ‘space of exchange’, and furthermore exists as a *condition* of be(com)ing.

²⁷⁹ Bolt, B. (2016) Artistic Research: A Performative Paradigm? In *PARSE, Issue 3: Repetitions and Reneges*. <https://parsejournal.com/article/artistic-research-a-performative-paradigm/> [Accessed 31 July 2021]

²⁸⁰ Dawood, S. (2013) *Black Sun: Alchemy, Diaspora & Heterotopia*. London: Ridinghouse Publishing, p57.

²⁸¹ Dawood, S. (2013) *Black Sun: Alchemy, Diaspora & Heterotopia*. London: Ridinghouse Publishing, p57.

Chapter Seven – The Ambix

“It’s so odd to have exchanged my paints for this strange thing that is the word. Words – I move cautiously among them for they can turn threatening...I write in signs that are more gesture than a voice. All this is what I got used to in painting, delving into the intimate nature of things.”

Clarice Lispector, *Água Viva*. (1973)

Measuring Magic

To engage with painting, either as the painter or through the viewers eyes, is to encounter a magical process that at times seems as unfathomable as it is unknowable. How *does* a painting come into being? What unseen transformations befall the painter and her painting as they experience and absorb the hidden forces of this mysterious happening? Must this magic be deemed measurable to quantify its existence, or is an intuited sense of knowing enough?



There are inevitably questions that cannot (yet) be (fully) answered, there remain many threads that need to be brought together to draw tangible conclusions from this w/hole. But rather than offering a resolved and carefully staged Conclusion, I put this chapter forward instead as 'The Ambix'. The ambix is an ancient alchemical vessel used for distillation; all the heated vaporous thoughts and threads will be swirled around within this ambix, and the resulting concentrated matter examined closely. And, just as distillation is not the final step in the process of Alchemical experimentation, neither is this chapter offered as the final step of this research; this chapter offers an *ending* – but certainly not an end. What this chapter re/presents is an encapsulation of the liminal, of the 'space of exchange', existing within this research.

Within the ambix, after the distillation of thinking has been concluded, and articulated in the context of new knowledge, there remains a stubborn residue of those thoughts that cannot be fully processed. These thoughts could be said to remain hovering in the liminal: they are not yet ready to be transmuted into apodictic knowledge and must remain in that state of transmutation and vaporousness for now. This is the shady territory of the liminal as the not-yet-known. Within this uncertain space, I propose that the framework of the alchemical is indeed the key to cohesion. Taking Elkins writings on painting and alchemy (in the material sense) as a starting point for my research, I began to consider – through this research journey - that utilising the philosophical framework of alchemy could be applied to the *process* of painting itself; to provide both a structure, and a language to better understand the inner workings of that process.

To look towards the alchemical did indeed seem a paradoxical turn, since alchemical processes have historically been dismissed as 'magic' or trickery, as representing the darker arts at play, and something to be deeply suspicious of. The alchemist was most often seen as the orchestrator of

unfathomable transformations and transubstantive happenings - not measurable, not explainable, and barely believable. My own approach was to bring elements of the alchemical into the painting process – in terms of advocating an innovative approach, experimental techniques, the pursuit of transformative potentials, and a belief in the possibility for transubstantive events – in order to disrupt any notion of accepted stasis within painting practice. For the path that the painter follows is one that has no end.

Within this research, the language of the alchemical is utilised to better articulate the concept of 'be(com)ing' – the event that encapsulates the manifestation and force of transubstantive potential. Be(com)ing is vital because it enables a new way to conceptualise the transformation of painting (applied matter) into painting (object), as well as the transformation of the painter as the conduit of this process. I do not consider alchemy in terms of dark magic and deception, preferring instead to consider the study of alchemy as an embodied and experiential journey. It represents the search for (un)knowing, for a space of contemplative thought, and a journey towards philosophical understanding – one which I argue draws us towards a 'space of exchange'.

“And above all, watch with glittering eyes the whole world around you because the greatest secrets are always hidden in the most unlikely places. Those who don't believe in magic will never find it.”

Roald Dahl, *The Minpins*

Answering Unanswerable Questions (and Questioning Unquestioned Answers)

It is through a nuanced lens of tacit knowing, not-knowing and (un)knowing that I will examine the extent to which my intended research aims, and the arising questions, have been met. I will also point forward to the remaining between-spaces yet to be uncovered, yet to become known.

The over-arching aim of this research has been to critically examine the inner world of contemporary painting practice through a re-imagining of the concepts of liminality and alchemy in relation to process, and to introduce the concept of a 'space of exchange' therein. Through adopting transformative methods of experimentation, intervention, collaboration and performative iterations through practice, these concepts have been shaped and redefined in order that they may contribute to an expanded painterly language that can operate as a form of meaning-making in the enactment and encounter of painting. I put forward an argument that it will be necessary to re/establish the primacy of process within painting practice if painting is to remain relevant in tomorrow's changed world, and that these refined (and re-defined) concepts of the liminal and alchemical could have an important role to play in this investigation of painting process from the inside, out.

Here I reintroduce my research questions, as set out in the Introduction (Pathways Emerging).

1. To what extent can the liminal be understood as a 'space of exchange' within contemporary painting practice, and how can this space offer new ways of conceptualising the enactment and encounter of contemporary painting?
2. In what ways can the transformative potential of the painting process be exploited by the painter to harness the (as-yet-undefined) forces within that process, normally concealed in the painted object?
3. How might the concept and language of alchemy and its processes be appropriated to reveal and further articulate the transubstantive happenings contained within the painting process?

My opening question is one of two parts, the first of which asked *to what extent the liminal could be understood as a 'space of exchange' within contemporary painting practice.*

Articulating a 'space of exchange', imagined as existing within the liminal potentials of the painting process, was not an easy task. Many questions emerged from this strange endeavour. What exactly is this 'space of exchange'? Where and how does it 'sit' within, besides, or around the liminal? How is it found? What is its function, and why does it matter that we understand this concept? The task that I set out was a difficult challenge in itself; for the liminal, and hence the 'space of exchange', exist on a psychophysical plane – unseeable, and yet somehow infinitely knowable. It is a concept that whilst tangible, resists definition at every turn; it cannot be mapped, touched, nor replicated. Those who believe they encounter it, who *feel* it, and emerge changed from it, cannot describe it in a language that we understand. Yet.

In terms of relating concepts of the liminal to the process of painting, it has historically been approached in a limited way; representational interpretations of liminality in painting (as object) are commonplace - but approaching the process of painting through the *conceptual lens* of the liminal is not. I have argued, in Chapters One and Six, that the painter *must* locate, inhabit, and experience the liminal in order to uncover the potential for transformation. I have positioned the 'space of exchange' as one that allows 'stuff' to happen; it is here, through the triggering of (and acquiescing to) the transubstantive forces within, that knowledge emerges and the process of be(com)ing is realised for painter and painting. It follows that this is not a static place, but a necessarily fluid space, flexing and evolving with every encounter. After investigating ways to illuminate this unseen and unknown space, I concluded that whilst I had initially journeyed to *locate* the liminal, and a 'space of exchange' *within*, rather I was looking for *something* that embodied the *characteristics* and *potentiality* of the liminal. This reimagining of the liminal space is not a waiting-space, a threshold to a new mode of being that cannot be transgressed until the subject is deemed to be ready for transformation and the encountering of this rite of passage. Hence, this reconceptualisation and uncovering of the 'space of exchange' goes against this traditional rhetoric of liminality and offers an entirely new perspective. For here, we do not wait for change to find us.

As the painter, I am not waiting for change, I am the Instigator of Metamorphosis.

In locating this 'space of exchange', I am empowered through process to initiate the act of 'presencing', and work towards the 'be(com)ing' of painting; to bring about alchemical, transformative happenings within that space for both the painter and the process of painting. And so here, occurring

in a transubstantive instant, exists the 'space of exchange'; its essence and forces encompassed within and beyond the liminal; a transformative space to be encountered and enacted, to be lived. This is not a mythical or mystical space, but a space of *change*, as well as *exchange*; it is a space of epistemic significance - it is where thinking is processed into knowledge, where the (in)visible becomes visible, and painting and painter emerge transformed. In conclusion, I put forward that this re-imagined liminal is the 'space of exchange'.

Let us consider how this concept can affect both painter and viewer in the enactment and encounter of painting. I argue that an understanding of this notion, the 'space of exchange', can indeed offer new ways for the painter to conceptualise, understand and realise the enactment of her craft. For the painter does not take a passive role in this situation; by contrast, she assumes the position of the provocateur, stimulating the transformative potentials within the space of exchange itself. To unlock these possibilities, the painter must approach this space without preconception or prejudice. She also understands that this is a space of thinking, feeling *and* praxis; for the 'finished' painting is multi-layered, a lived object, a knowledge-system - the thought processes, the anxieties, the ambitions of the painter, every emotion is laminated within and between those layers. The painter who successfully inhabits this 'space of exchange' is positioning herself as open to the 'letting go' and 'letting come' of process',²⁸² and embraces these yet-to-be-known waves of change and exchange with relish.

The second component to this question was *to consider how this space can offer new ways of conceptualising the enactment (in relation to the painter) and encounter (in relation to the viewer) of contemporary painting*. I posit that an understanding of this concept of 'space of exchange' offers the capacity to evoke a new way of 'looking at' and encountering painting, a *being-with*²⁸³ painting. This enables a new understanding of the painting process; it brings the previously concealed layers of making, thinking, and feeling (closer) to the surface - the viewer is not simply looking, but *seeing* with *all* her senses.²⁸⁴ The backstage is now brought forward into the arena of the frontstage.

I put forward that by assuming an understanding of how a painting might come into being, and encouraging an awareness of process within practice, the encounter of viewer and painting is one of heightened reflexivity; the viewer able to 'look' at painting as the painter would see it, from the inside-out, and is able to transition from looking to a position of being-with. As discussed in Chapter One, I build on Horvath's notion of the prism as being the most effective way of imagining the liminal, and I utilise the same vision to articulate the encounter of painting, through an awareness of harnessing the

²⁸² 'Letting go' and 'Letting come' are notions put forward by Otto Scharmer in his *Theory U*, as explored in Chapter Two.

²⁸³ This is a Heideggerian neologism, a translation of his concept '*Mitsein*'. Heidegger positions this concept as facilitating a side-by-side relationship within societal situations, an understanding that I have transposed here onto the viewer-painting encounter. Heidegger, M. (1962) *Being and Time*, New York: Harper & Row.

²⁸⁴ Here I make reference to Laura Marks concept of haptic visuality, as discussed in Chapter Six.

‘space of exchange’. Seemingly an invisible concept, much like the prism as transparent object, it absorbs our thinking as we approach it, it refracts our current understanding of the world, and separates out the structural threads of our encounter. The encounter now encompasses the possibility of inward travel, of reflection, and modes of evaluation. The viewer, as the painter also, emerges on the other side – changed, and yet somehow the same.

potentials

My second question asked *in what ways can the transformative potentials of the painting process could be exploited by the painter to harness the (as-yet-undefined) forces within the process, normally concealed in the (finished) painting-as-object?*

I contend that the forces imbricated within the painting process are multiple and heterogeneous. They include the pull of ambition and desire, fear and doubt, creation and creativity, the performative and possibility, transubstantiation, and transformation. It is the combination of these forces that drive the painter forward, fuelling the process, and feeding the outcomes of that process. The combination of these forces within the liminal is fierce: I contend that Turner’s description of the liminal as a space of ‘fructile chaos’,²⁸⁵ can fruitfully be applied to these combined forces within. They are simultaneously fertile with trans/formational possibility, yet fragile, dangerous and unpredictable. The ‘space of exchange’ I put forward, could collapse into chaos at any time, rendering any notion of valid outcome void. Yet the painter is only able to exploit these potentials to her advantage when she is receptive to this chaotic notion of the ‘space of exchange’, and able to relinquish control of the process to the forces within and render them (in)visible.

This initial investigation led me to consider a further conundrum: *how* can the painter then exploit the potentials contained within this ‘space of exchange’ – for reaching a position of transmutation and change is never a given. If the painter is to realise the transformative power of this space, in order to push forward current thinking, experimental practice, and modes of being, she must, through presencing, re-harness these latent forces, and shape them through a performative enactment of her process. Having initially relinquished control in order to *locate* the ‘space of exchange’, the painter is now able to absorb these forces and is re-energised by the frisson of the not-yet-known; she moves instinctively towards the pull of the possible. But this is a dangerous path: these collective forces, now recognised as an entity of ‘fructile chaos’ will always present as a destabilising, contradictory and

²⁸⁵ Turner, V. (1969) *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti Structure*. London: Routledge, p.11

subversive arena – it is for the painter to harness those forces and to recognise that these same forces are also those that enable the conditions required for change, transformation, and transubstantiation. To tame these forces is to find a between-space, between presencing and be(com)ing, that can bring forth new thinking, doing, and knowledge.

And so, I consider what these collective transformative potentials residing within the liminal, represent. I put forward that it represents the possibilities (for nothing here is certain or presumed) for the *bringing into being* of painting(object) and of painter(subject). Furthermore, I argue that this potential is realised through the performative event of painting (as process) within the ‘space of exchange’. I contend that to simply produce a painting through the performed and ritual action of applying paint to surface, is simply not enough to affect transformation. But a painting produced as the outcome of the *performative event* of painting is an entirely different ‘thing’; evidenced by a level of affect that is experienced by the painter, the material, the painting and the process alike. The instant of be(com)ing relinquishes the painter from the hold of the Painting, and both emerge into Being.

It is here that this thesis offers the delineation of a new conceptual space of fluidity and knowledge-exchange within the painting process, one that is able to challenge established interpretations of what painting has become today - and could be tomorrow. These answers are found only through the experiential process of painting itself: this performative event is where painting *becomes* the research.



Figure 77 Sally Bailey, *PhD Take-Over 3: Exhibition/Exposition*, 2019. Installation view.²⁸⁶

²⁸⁶ To date, the PhD cohort at the School of Art have staged three 'Take-Over' events. Documentation from the most recent event is included as an appendix to this thesis, setting out the background and importance of such opportunities. The original document was written for the purposes of a supervision meeting that followed the Take-Over.

Finally, I considered *how can the concept and language of alchemy and its processes might be appropriated to reveal and further articulate the transubstantive happenings contained within the painting process?*

In Chapter One I put forward that the lens of the alchemical was a useful and constructive way to consider the painting process as situated withing the liminal. This 'alchemical investigation' has drawn on the structure and language of alchemy to that end; for the painter's journey through the 'space of exchange' - encountering the forces within, experiencing the transubstantive energy of those forces, and being changed irreversibly by the process – bears the hallmarks of transformational alchemical happenings. I contend that painting and alchemy, although not closely related, make easy friends; both processes share many commonalities. In the first instance, painting and alchemy are both primarily concerned with the transmutation of matter. To achieve this aim, both painter and alchemist undertake material experiments; both are necessarily messy processes, and as James Elkins writes of painting and alchemy, "neither are done with clean hands."²⁸⁷

Painting is *alchemy*. Its materials are worked without knowledge of their properties, by blind experiment, by the feel of the paint.²⁸⁸

Both painter and alchemist strive to bring about a fundamental change in matter itself; it is from this position that I consider how the language and process of this ancient art can illuminate the inner processes of contemporary painting, confirming the reciprocal nature of this pairing. Within these linked processes of alchemy and painting, many of the ingredients and substances are also shared; both utilise substances such as linseed oil, ground minerals, spirits, and organic matter. The painter and the alchemist both think through, and seek answers through, the manipulation of these materials. Elkins elaborates thus:

Painting ...takes place outside science and any sure and exact knowledge. It is a kind of immersion in substances, a wonder, a delight in their unexpected shapes and feels...the alchemists had names for their transmutations, and those can help give voice to the many metamorphoses painters try to make in paint.²⁸⁹

And thus, where these connections between painting and alchemy reveal themselves, the *painter-as-alchemist* emerges. My own argument goes beyond Elkin's explanation of the event, for I contend that

²⁸⁷ Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is*. London: Routledge, p5.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p9.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid*, p193.

the painter-as-chemist is seeking not only to transform matter, but to *be transformed oneself* by the medium and the process.

The usefulness in using the alchemical to articulate the painterly, does not end with process and material, for the language of alchemy is also useful in offering a framework for experimental practice. In Chapter One, I offered the following re-imagining of the painting process, as shaped by the seven stages of the alchemical process:

calcinatio (burning). I interpret this initial beginning of the alchemical process as being akin to the moment the painter stands before a fresh canvas. All notions of what has passed before are put aside; the ground is razed. This is an important stage since there can be no presumption or expectation of outcome; the painter relinquishes control and anticipates the journey ahead.

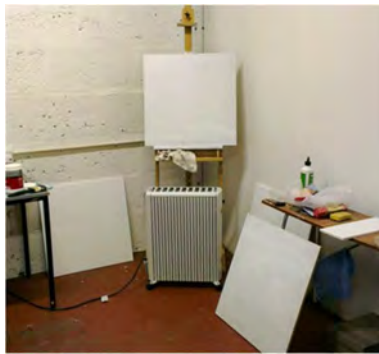


Figure 78 Sally Bailey, fragment xiii.

sublimatio (purification). The painter gathers her tools and materials, her thinking is focused, and she starts anew. Each event of painting begins from this place of newness; previous events cannot be replicated or reproduced, and the painter understands this.



Figure 79 Sally Bailey, fragment xiv.

solutio (combining with liquid). Here, I envisage that the painter/process/medium become a single fluid entity immersed in this transubstantive process. As the arena for presencing is approached, there is no delineation between the painter, her materials, her methods.

putrfectio (fermenting). As the 'space of exchange' is reached, there occurs a melding and coming together of the *solutio*; here is situated the possibility for newness as the arena of be(com)ing is approached.



Figure 80 Sally Bailey, fragment xv.

distillation (distilling). The transformative potentials of the alchemical process are realised. This represents a period of reflection and anticipation, but still the outcomes are undefined, and the possibility of failure is ever-present.

coagulation (forming a new substance) The forces contained and expelled during this process come back together; they are now manifested in material form, as painting.



Figure 81 Sally Bailey, fragment xvi.

tincture. (application) Now removed from the process, the painter and painting (as subject/object) are now separated. This is the point at which the strands of thinking, making, being, start to come together – weaving, interconnected, indexical and yet interdependent.

The lens of the alchemical is also useful in providing the means to articulate the transformational potential of such an approach. But as discussed in Chapter one, there can be no certainty of outcome here, no presumption of resolution within this unpredictable process; painting, alongside alchemy, embodies a level of precarity that can cause many doubt their ability to succeed. Indeed, Elkins comments that “from an artist’s point of view, I think the most important lesson of alchemy may be the alchemist’s willingness to risk insanity.”²⁹⁰ Tenacity, dogged determination, stubbornness; these are all qualities that the painter-as-chemist must adopt. The painter must develop a thick skin to be able to move forward, for inevitably the failures will be many, and recognition for their work hard won. That said, the recursive nature of the relationship between alchemy and the creative processes of painting is critical in understanding how painting becomes; I argue that the painting process requires an awareness and inclusion of alchemical process in order to come into being.

²⁹⁰ Elkins, J. (2000) *What Painting Is*. London: Routledge, p194.

Contributions

I argue that residing in the between spaces of thinking/making/writing, are answers that can contribute to a better understanding of the experience, enactment, and encounter of painting through process. From these answers have emerged three distinct contributions that I have been able to make towards new knowledge in the context of contemporary painting practice. The first contribution is a new lexicon relating to this re-imagining of the liminal in the painting process, the second a blueprint for a liminal methodology, and thirdly the concept of a 'space of exchange'.

one: lexicon

My research is underpinned by a new lexicon of hybrid terms; I present these as necessary to reflect the continuing evolvement of the contemporary painter and painting. These new terms contribute to an expanded, and ever-expanding, language with which to better understand the relation integrity between practice, materiality, the magic of process, and outcome.

We use the language of Language to talk of painting. When we do not speak this visual painterly language fluently, we use the etymological structures of language that we do understand, and project that onto the conversation around painting. We talk of 'reading' a painting, of the 'passages' in paint that 'speak' to us – we feel comfortable with the familiarity of these words wrapped around a process that remains other. Language, understood as spoken words, leaves no visible trace - unlike painting as language. Robert Motherwell articulates the discourse surrounding painting as means of communication (be that language, translation, or narrative) beautifully, distilling his notion of what painting *is* thus:

Painting is a medium in which the mind can actualize itself; it is a medium of thought. Thus painting, like music, tends to become its own content. Painting is a reality, among realities, which has been felt and formed. It is the pattern of choices made, from the realm of possible choices, which gives painting its form.²⁹¹

Reading Motherwell's words, that 'painting is a reality which has been felt and formed', emphasizes the ability of painting to communicate on so many levels. Painting shows us what *matters* in the world, it helps us *understand* what matters in the world, and why *we* matter. Painting has the power to move

²⁹¹ Ashton, D. ed. (2007) *The Writings of Robert Motherwell*. USA: University of California Press, p32.

people, provoke reactions, elicit emotions, and ignite discussion. Painting can change perceptions, attitudes and thinking.

Painting, and the notion of what we consider painting to be, has evolved rapidly – and yet the language we use to converse *about* painting has not. Throughout this thesis I have addressed the gaps in this lacking language, bridging those gaps with a number of hybrid words and reimagined phrases that better reflect the actualities of contemporary painting today. This new lexicon also alludes to the liminal as a ‘language’ beyond words; a language that relies on affect, the senses, and encounter. The use of neologisms in academic writing is not generally encouraged, but when known language proves inadequate, I argue that this inventiveness is necessary to our understanding. I turn to the writing of Helene Cixous to endorse this approach; of such invention she writes:

And what words do between themselves – couplings, mating, hybridisations – is genius. An erotic and fertile genius. A law of life presides over their crossbreedings...Language is not finished. We can all be provisional demiurges by creating newborns. Language lends itself willingly to these genetic miracles.²⁹²

In this thesis I thus present proudly the studio-as-laboratory, the painter-as-chemist, of be(com)ing, and more, as part of this lexicon. In doing so, I draw on and repurpose the ancient language of the alchemical to demystify the transubstantive and transformational processes that the painter alone bears witness to. I am slowly filling in the between-spaces; here I set out the terms that I offer to the (metaphorical) painterly mix.

i) painter-as-chemist

The contemporary painter embodies the essence of the chemist in almost every facet of her practice; from the raw materials used, the mixing of pigments where the recipes remain unchanged for centuries, through to the eternal quest for the transmutation of matter. The painter-as-chemist pursues this quest relentlessly, never rattled by failure, anticipating the moment where Painting is finally borne from painting.

ii) studio-as-laboratory

The function of the contemporary studio moves far beyond a simple site of making. It remains a place of work, but in an expanded sense that also embodies all that the painter is, and all she must become. The ‘studio’, which can no longer be considered in terms of a fixed place

²⁹² Cixous, H. (1998) *Stigmata*, London: Routledge, p196.
Rather ironically, the chapter that bears this reference is entitled ‘*Going Off Writing*’.

constructed from bricks and mortar, reflects in its form and function the position of contemporary painting practice - it encompasses a space for experimentation, for exploration, for rumination and production. Today's 'studio' is a liminal space – sitting somewhere between the painter and the materiality of the painting process; it represents a space of potentiality and creativity.

It follows that if I am offering the notion of the painter-as-chemist, that her place of 'work' would be the studio-as-laboratory; an unfixed space in which to embrace the not-yet-known, to drive forward experimental practice, to court the risk of failure, and relish the challenge of reaching the 'space of exchange' and everything that lies beyond.

iii) presencing

The concept of presencing is reimagined here as the time/space/moment *between* and imbricated with the becoming of an event; it represents an emergence from one state of being to another – of painting(process) to Painting(object). This is not a static experience, but a transformational one; it embodies a desire for progression, a moving forward, a drawing towards, the path of presencing flows in multiple directions simultaneously. The artist Helen Frankenthaler described her own path through the process of presencing thus:

As I develop a particular painting, I depart from a concept and reach instead into the demands of the canvas before me. What's coming through is telling me that I must go elsewhere. So while I might give the opening direction, the painting, as it progresses through my mind and body, determines its own journey to completion...the artist has to have a dialogue with what is being created.²⁹³

As Frankenthaler acknowledges, this is the anticipation of the yet-to-be-known. Presencing, and the potential for it to be experienced, hovers in what I propose is the 'space of exchange'. It encompasses the transitional phase of the 'space of exchange', or at least the possibility of it. It is an intuited space allowing for the quiet deconstruction of thinking, method and process and the potential for the representation of the knowledges gained within.

By releasing herself to this notion of presencing, the painter is able to move through and between the permeable boundaries of the liminal, and towards transformation.

²⁹³ Deishpoon, D. (2014) *Giving Up One's Mark: Helen Frankenthaler in the 1960s and 1970s*. Exhibition catalogue interview. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, New York.

iv) be(com)ing

In the final stages of the painting process, the painter encounters the state of Becoming, existing as the movement towards the outcome of process. This is then superseded by the transition into a state of Being – and it is this second transitional space I choose to call Be(com)ing, since it represents the moment of *coming into being*. This moment of be(com)ing absorbs and transforms the forces of time and the temporal within the process of painting, to be repositioned as an external presence in the visible, ‘real’ world. Be(com)ing re/presents the transubstantive instant in this uncertain process.

Be(com)ing occurs through the performative event of painting. It represents the resolution of the painter’s journey, a movement towards the outcome. Never inevitable, but always possible.

v) the (in)visible

The notion of the (in)visible, as articulated in the Introduction, exists as a quality within the liminal. It is neither process nor object but is positioned as part of the journey between; it exists where the opposite states of invisible and visible oscillate, and hovers as the (in)visible wherein the transformative potentials exist.



Figure 82 Sally Bailey, *(In)Visible*. Painting diagram, 2021.

vi) a space of exchange

As defined by Brendan Prendiville, first using this term to explore the writing and philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (regarding the interplay between painting, perception, and space), the ‘space of exchange’ is offered as a transitional and transactional space, a space for negotiation where new openings await to be forged, and the potential for new exchanges revealed. Within the context of this research, I re-imagine this concept and shape it to enable an articulation of the liminal in contemporary painting process and practice. I claim this

redefined concept as my own, and as a contribution to knowledge – hence a full definition is located in the final part of this chapter.

vii) painting-diagram

As my research is embedded in my practice, it seemed logical that the diagrams included within this thesis would reflect and emerge from that practice. Hence these naively painted articulations of process and thinking were conceived. I name them Painting-Diagrams.

viii) exhibition/exposition

Since this research has sought to capture the essence of the transubstantive *processes* of painting, the traditional exhibition format is no longer sufficient to articulate these findings. I considered that it is still important to ‘show’ and reveal these findings and concluded that to present ‘work’ and ‘workings’ might be better understood if the presentation were reframed and re-imagined as an exhibition/exposition. Exhibition, as a display and demonstration of ‘work’, and exposition as an inclusion of the ‘workings’, the backdrop of revealing process; these come together in a melding of the frontstage/backstage as exhibition/exposition.

ix) being-with

I have argued that the concept of a ‘space of exchange’ can provide a new way of ‘looking at’ painting; I name this encountering as *being-with* painting. Drawing on Heidegger’s notion of ‘Mitsein’ (as discussed earlier in this chapter), I posit that this enables a new understanding of the painting process; it brings the previously concealed layers of making, thinking, and feeling (closer) to the surface - the viewer is not simply looking, but *seeing* with *all* her senses. The viewer able to ‘look’ at painting as the painter would see it, from the inside-out, and is able to transition from simply looking, to a position of *being-with*.

x) liminal methodology

This research offers the blueprint for a new methodology. Here I present a liminal methodology, one that sits between and beyond existing methodologies – it is interdisciplinary, transitional, flexible and porous, a methodology that can better navigate the ‘between’ spaces of artistic research, the slippery areas that are so difficult to grasp. This is discussed as a contribution in itself below.

two: liminal methodology

My liminal methodology encourages a rhizomatic and heterogeneous approach to method; one of multiple approaches conducted simultaneously. And herein lies the strength of this approach - that to embrace the flexibility to utilise different methodological combinations in different situations can lead to an infinite number of possibilities. I cast my own net far and wide; nothing is thrown aside, everything is documented, every seemingly unanswerable question recorded. This is the raw material of knowledge-making; every scrap will eventually find its place and purpose at some future point in time.

This Liminal Methodology is not to be considered as a rigid structure, but envisaged as a multi-faceted *shape* – amorphic, constantly shifting and stretching. It is capable of allowing its multiple strands to overlap, to intersect, to weave and to merge – to be in itself a ‘space of exchange’. To embrace this approach may feel unnatural at first, instinct constantly tells us that research and research methodologies must follow a well-laid rigorous path – but sometimes it feels good to run fast in the opposite direction, putting aside notions of what is expected, and to pursue what *feels* right.

Florian Dombois, artist and author, writes on the precarity of research through practice, an endeavour that requires a certain bravery to pursue:

Artistic (knowledge) research is an activity for border crossers who, when negotiating frontiers, carry out their research somewhat differently from those who expand knowledge by inflating known territories or by registering a new claim in the hope that they will strike gold while keeping others out.²⁹⁴

Dombois articulates what practice-based researchers know in their hearts; that to research through practice *is* different – and it therefore follows that the ‘doing’ of it should be different also. Unlike scientific approaches to research, requiring explicit answers to known questions, artistic research is often undertaken without actually knowing what the real questions are at the outset, let alone conducted in the knowledge that implicit answers may be all that is attainable. It is within this arena that this liminal methodology can provide a forgiving framework for the job in hand.

In Chapter Three, I set out the strategies currently employed within my liminal methodology. At any given time, this liminal methodology might include any combination of the following and more: painting, writing, self-reflection, observation, sketchbooks, reflective journals, mapping, performance,

²⁹⁴ Dombois, F. (ed), *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*. London: Koenig Books, 2012.

photographic documentation, repurposing, material, the immaterial, conversation, exhibition, exposition, more painting, not painting, re-painting, experimentation, fictioning and narration, play and mess, failure and risk, collaboration, object-making, and everything in/between. Rhizomatic in nature, it spreads beneath the surface of my practice; as a praxis point of interface it flourishes in the between spaces of making, thinking, and doing. However, it is important to acknowledge here that a long list of methods to be used does *not* a methodology make. As Knowles and Cole acknowledge there is a danger here:

...in art-making processes being reduced to tools or techniques when using them as integral to qualitative research making them devoid of meaning in relationship to the deeper purposes of the research.²⁹⁵

I position this list of methods presented as representative of a moment in time; this list exists as a current, but evolvable list of ingredients with which to experiment. It is this sense of playful experimentation, an immersion into my practice as research – an improvised ‘doing’ in order to make sense of that activity – that give structure and form to this disparate list of activities, and the methods utilised at any given time then become a methodology. I consider that the structure of this liminal methodology acts as a repository for these individual research strategies – I borrow what I need, in different combinations, in different situations.

This methodology is purposefully messy, playful, porous, and unpredictable; a liminal methodology, like my practice, is one that focuses on the *processes* of painting practice over expected outcomes, quantifiable data, or knowledge production. I argue that this liminal methodology houses the potential to redefine the ‘shape’ of future research and methodologies of that research, making room for the processes of practice to be given due consideration. As Gray and Malins observe:

Only through investigating and comparing different research approaches and the various methods used are we enabled to make an informed decision about how to proceed. The aim of methodology is to help us understand, in the broadest possible terms, not the product of inquiry, but the process itself.²⁹⁶

Which brings this discussion full circle; I argue that this liminal methodology, as with the overarching aim of this thesis it resides in, is to re-establish an emphasis of process, of handling, of doing – and from this is generated a heightened understanding of how such emphasis can advance the uncovering of knowledge. And whilst this ‘tool-kit’²⁹⁷ approach to methodology is certainly not new,²⁹⁸ the

²⁹⁵ Knowles J.G. & Cole, A.L. (2008) *Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies Examples, and Issues*. London: Sage Publications, p359.

²⁹⁶ Gray, C. & Malins, J. (2004) *Visualizing Research: A Guide to the Research Process in Art and Design*. London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd, p17

²⁹⁷ Ibid, p74.

²⁹⁸ Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S. (eds.) (1994). *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publishing. In the introduction, Denzin and Lincoln liken the creative-researcher to a ‘bricoleur’; one who ‘makes do’ with available materials and methods, and creates new ones as needed.

utilisation here of a *liminal* methodology – as embodying the potential for transformation, curiousness, and knowing – *is* unique. I contend that the liminal methodology is one better able to navigate the painting process and the transubstantive since it reflects the very nature of that which it seeks to uncover and understand: the inner world of painting, and the ‘space of exchange’ embedded with transformative potentials, understood as existing within (and as) the liminal.

three: a space of exchange

Earlier in this chapter I made promise of a full definition of this ‘space of exchange’; perhaps an over-commitment, since is it plausible that something so nebulous cannot be defined *exactly*? Perhaps - and this is important: that the fluidity and amorphous nature of this concept, and the potential for change that it elicits, is more important to the process and outcome of painting than the rigid territory of precise definition.

Some things *are* known; the relationship and reliance of the ‘space of exchange’ on the notion of liminality, and its imbricated function in the process of painting have been explored within and through this research. I have argued that the ‘space of exchange’ is the key concept underpinning this research; it exists as a re-imagining of the liminal space in the contemporary painting process. I offer it as a psychophysical space; a space that is felt, intuited, and becomes (un)known. It embodies the characteristics and qualities of the liminal (as fluid, nebulous and ambiguous), but is no longer to be perceived as simply a transitional or waiting space. For the ‘space of exchange’ here, represents a re-positioning of this threshold as being an open, fertile and generative space of potential, possibility, and plausibility. It is an emergent and subversive space – ‘stuff’ happens here; it is where knowledge emerges, where painter and painting come into being, and henceforth transition into the realm of the visible. This is the inner world of painting; it is where making can become meaning. As Danielle Boutet writes:

Art does not express something external or remote; it is not “about something”. It is itself that something...the meaning does not pre-exist: it comes into existence with the work. This is why art can at once be a mode of expression and a mode of knowing...an experience to be lived in a spatiotemporal dimension that the artwork carves out of ordinary space-time, giving it form (in/forming it).²⁹⁹

I conclude that locating the liminal within the painting process cannot alone bring about change, transformation and being. For this to happen, it requires the painter to access the ‘space of exchange’

²⁹⁹ Boutet, D. “Vision and Experience: The Contribution of Art to Transdisciplinary Knowledge.” In *Transdisciplinary Journal of Engineering and Science*, Vol 4, pp105-115. (December 2013) p109.

and to harness the transubstantive forces within. However, to access this space is not a straightforward task, for this psychophysical space lurks in the slippages and interstices between thinking and making, it is a tricky (and tricking) place to navigate. It is also a space to be approached with caution, for the outcomes cannot be predicted or prescribed; the painter feels her way through this space tentatively, acquiescing to the forces within the process. The 'space of exchange' defines the existence of the liminal within the contemporary painting process as a place of transubstantive potential. Without this 'space of exchange', the liminal reverts to existing as simply a 'waiting-space', a limbo world of permanent between-ness. For the painter immersed in process, the 'space of exchange' is one that evokes a desire to *experience* change; it offers a space for exploration and connection, a space to think and re-think.

To encounter and enter the 'space of exchange', the painter must be receptive of its existence; to emerge from the 'space of exchange', the painter must experience it, absorb and exploit the potentials therein. She must carefully negotiate the exit points - through presencing and be(com)ing. At the point of coming into being, the painter deems the process to be 'done', and a point of closure has been reached.³⁰⁰ Her work is done, and she must now extricate herself from it. For importantly, this is a 'space of exchange', and *change*, for both painter and painting.



Figure 83 Sally Bailey, *Untitled (Towards Being)*. Gouache and pen on A4 watercolour paper, 2021.

³⁰⁰ This is not the same thing as a finished or resolved outcome; it is done, the painter has no more left to give.

I posit that this re-imagined concept could indeed 'reshape the territory of painting',³⁰¹ for whilst artists in the past have tended to approach the liminal in contemporary art representationally, this research reshapes the liminal conceptually to provide new ways of looking, being-with, enacting and encountering painting – and to foster conditions for the ongoing resuscitation of contemporary painting practice. I refer to the words of Jim Mooney, who questions previous attempts to breathe new life into painting by ever-expanding the parameters of what painting could be:

I have considerable sympathy for this ambition to reshape the territory of painting...however, I would propose that the more pressing exigency and arguably, the more challenging, would be to revitalise our understanding of painting.³⁰²

Here Mooney is suggesting that the expanded field of painting could be somewhat counterproductive; it does not in itself foster greater understanding, and conversely could lead to greater confusion. I concur, and posit that this understanding must come from within, from looking at painting through the eyes of the painter (from the inside, out), and is achieved through a tacit knowing of process, and the 'space of exchange' within.

Here I re-imagine the liminal as the *Space of Exchange*.

It is not an object or a being, a mapped place, or knowable outcome.

It is not fabulation or myth, and cannot be measured, quantified, or replicated.

It is a discursive place, and one of curiousness and potentials.

It exists as a psychophysical space, embodied in the process and the painter.

Through presencing and be(com)ing, it brings painter and painting into Being.

³⁰¹ Mooney, J. Painting: Poignancy and Ethics. In: MacLeod, K. & Holdridge, L. eds. (2006) *Thinking Through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*. London: Routledge, p134.

³⁰² Ibid.

Possibilities

When we 'look' at painting, we stand back, we make space between ourselves and the artwork, we absorb the atmosphere and make small appreciative noises. But we are always '*outside*' of painting. This thesis documents a highly personal journey through my own process, practice and experience. Unlike the spectatorial gallery viewing, this vista has been nurtured in the inner world of painting, and we have encountered this journey from the inside out, just as the painter would experience it. From the inside, out.

We have encountered the forces of the liminal and alchemical within the painting process.

We have reconsidered what painting might 'look' like going forward.

We have looked at painting through the eyes of the painter.

We have played, made mess, encountered failure.

We have considered the language of, in and around painting.

Yet this is still not all that painting is.

There are still many unanswered questions (and unquestioned answers) that must remain so for now. I have reached the point of be(com)ing, and this thesis and I must now separate. But as already discussed, the very instant of be(com)ing represents the simultaneity of both endpoint and new beginning.

What lies ahead is the yet-to-be-known.

As I shared in the prologue to this thesis, the Pandemic of 2020-21 has greatly affected how this research has been conceived, conducted, and presented. Going forward, my first aim is to stage a (pre-pandemic) planned residency to collaboratively explore my notion of be(com)ing with a small group of fellow artists, writer, and thinkers. It is envisaged that the residency will exist as a space of exchange, and the voices of those involved will add another layer to my current thinking around the processes of art making. I envisage that the outcomes of this residency (artworks, residues of making, words, conversations, images, sounds, thinking) will form an expositional epilogue to this thesis.

Also, I intend to further research the role of the painter. This thesis has examined the *process* of painting, aiming to re-establish the primacy of process in order to facilitate new ways of looking and

seeing. Another perspective can be gained by considering the role of the painter, operating as the conduit between painting, Painting, and viewer. It is pertinent to acknowledge at this juncture that whilst this thesis is written *by* a painter, it is not exclusively *for* painters. My intention is that this thesis will be of interest to any practitioners, academics or theorists who have a curiosity and open approach to alternative ways of looking, making, thinking and doing.

Here is the final paradox: I have reached an ending that now becomes a beginning.

"The book is already closed as it is opened: every exit from the frame is already framed. No, I will not dream of the pure and simple absence from the frame. No, I will not be located outside. Dislocations. Little explosions. We are already within. It has already started but that is not the end of the story. An end which is but a return to the beginning, a first time."

Yve Lomax, *Writing the Image* (2000).

Interlude.

Painting is like wrestling.

Painting is like wrestling; a lot of push and pull, dancing and set moves, writhing around, becoming bruised and tired. The longer it goes on, the more exhausted and despondent you become. Reaction times slow. The final bell goes. Even the victor emerges battered and bloodied.

Was the outcome pre-determined? A fix? The audience do not deem the question worth pondering – for they are only interested in the spectacle of painting.

(Excerpt from Reflective Journal, July 2021)

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Appendix 1

PhD Take-Over Volume 3

July 1 – 12, 2019

Birmingham School of Art

The Take-Over occupied the Attic Studio for a two-week period, hosting a varied programme of events, and offering a creative space in which to make, think, write, talk and be. Importantly it offered a place for PhD researchers to come together as a collective to discuss experiences and expectations, to share ideas and to test new work. We were very grateful to receive two separate funding grants through BCU, which were used to fund visiting speakers, a film-showing, the building of two projection screens and a projection space, materials for making, and a drinks reception held in conjunction with the PGR Studio annual conference.



Figure 84 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

The above image shows Lucy Lopez in conversation with invited curators Alba Colomo and Tom Clark. The trio hosted a discussion group, where they presented their practice and research within the realm of institutions and infrastructures, and how these engage with politics, ecologies and practices of care.



Figure 85 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Gay Place discusses her work with SoA students. This was the first time that Gay had been able to hang this complete body of work together and it proved a real conversion piece. Gay had presented a research paper earlier that day at the PGR Studio Alchemies conference, and the chance to consider this body of work in its entirety whilst preparing for that presentation proved very valuable in terms of criticality and reflection.

As PhD students we rarely have the opportunity to get together in this way, particularly within a studio setting, and for such a length of time. We felt it was an important event to continue, as it had previously benefitted all those taking part hugely – whilst simultaneously raising the visibility of the PhD cohort at the School of Art and offered a platform to expose the concerns surrounding PhD study and ‘space’. Whilst other PhDs within the faculty of ADM have very real issues with diminishing office spaces available to them, at the School of Art we are very lucky to have retained our Research Office (The Secret Room up the Hidden Staircase) but have been continually frustrated that as practice-led PhDs we have not been afforded the same with regards to studio space. Therefore, the takeover event was critical in providing this opportunity, albeit temporarily. There was to be no ‘exhibition’, no private view, no formal gallery display, no theme, and no pre-empted outcomes. Instead, this was to be a free (and freeing) space to explore, share, experiment, and make. It offered an opportunity to consider cross-disciplinary collaborations, to test out work, to network, or to simply enjoy the company of like-minded creatives. New friendships were forged, and we all felt reinvigorated by the process.



Figure 86 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Tam discussed her recent thesis submission with the group, and all were extremely interested to see the non-linear approach she had taken with the structuring and publishing. It led to a lively discussion around notions of what a thesis *could* be, and how less conventional approaches could potentially enhance the navigating and understanding of Practice-led Research.



Figure 87 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Sophie Hedderwick tested out new VR works, and there were plenty of volunteers willing to step within the red circle. Ana Rutter provided sound recording for the VR piece, continuing their productive collaboration from the previous Takeover.



Figure 88 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 89 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 90 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Dr Hannah Lammin, lecturer at University of Greenwich, was invited to present her current research engaging with the performative logic of machine languages, bringing AI and critical algorithm studies into relation with creative arts practices. Dr Lammin also held individual crits with those working in the space who wanted to further discuss their work and ideas.

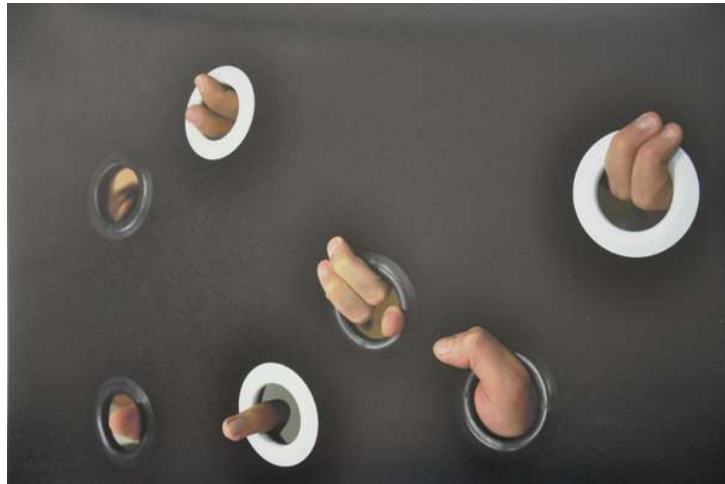


Figure 91 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 92 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 93 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Jo Fursman used her time at the Takeover to further develop work that she was taking to Vancouver at the end of July for a conference presentation and exhibition.

My own work continued the exploration of the process of painting and considering notions of ephemeral materiality within that process.



Figure 94 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 95 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.



Figure 96 PhD Take-Over Volume 3. Birmingham School of Art, 2019.

Much mess was made, much fun had, much wine consumed...

But most importantly, our main objective has indeed been achieved. A studio space has been allocated for PhD and MA students to share – the details of how this could work practically going forward are to be discussed in our first seminar meeting of the semester.

A huge thankyou to everyone involved.

Appendix 2

exhibition/exposition

November 1-5, 2021

Birmingham School of Art

/ɛksɪ'bjʃ(ə)n/ (n) a public display of works of art or items of interest, held in an art gallery or museum.

/ɛkspe'ziʃ(ə)n/ (n) a setting forth of the meaning or purpose. (n) discourse designed to convey information or explain what is difficult to understand.

"Exposition is an introduction. Exposition need not tell what something is; rather, it can set the ground for a play to follow, which can be open-ended and need not be concluded...Although introduction suggests discursiveness, what is meant here is not so much explanation but a willingness to share materials and modes of thinking and doing." (Schwab & Bergdorff, 2015)

Following the submission of my thesis, I began to consider what shape my viva-exhibition might take. The prevailing issue of Covid 19 and its continuing impact on exhibition-making was important here; the opportunity for a "traditional" exhibition looked unlikely, and as in so many areas of our lives, 'new' ways of doing needed to be explored. Thus, the concept of the 'exhibition' unwittingly became a site of necessary experimentation and change. I concluded that the viva-exhibition (in whatever form it was able to manifest itself) should present an *exposition* of my process, documenting this alchemical investigation of the liminal, and the methodologies employed therein.

This was important; the notion of 'exposition' contributes to my argument regarding the re/positioning of process in contemporary painting practice. It can bring about a paradigm shift in how painting is fundamentally encountered and experienced; by sharing these modes of making and knowledge production the 'inner world' of painting can become more readily accessible to the viewer. I put forward that the notion of exposition, in the context of the viva presentation, occupies a liminal space; it sits *between* process as practice and exhibition. The viva-exhibition functions as a 'space of exchange', better positioned to enable a sharing and understanding of material thinking, methods, and knowledges.

Here, in this (virtual) between-space, the outcomes of experimentation are displayed and viewed as in an exhibition, but here they are to be understood as functioning as an exposition of epistemic *things*; in a continuing process of evolving and revealing, they reflect a material moment in time, the beginnings of presencing.

This appendix documents the presentation of my practice and process within the exhibition space, for the purposes of the viva-exhibition. It was the first time I had been able to be alone with my work in a gallery setting for more than a year; it afforded some precious time to reflect, to absorb, and to heal.

I remain ever grateful.

exhibition/exposition

sally a. bailey

3 November 2021



Figure 97 Sally Bailey, *exhibition/exposition*. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 98 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.

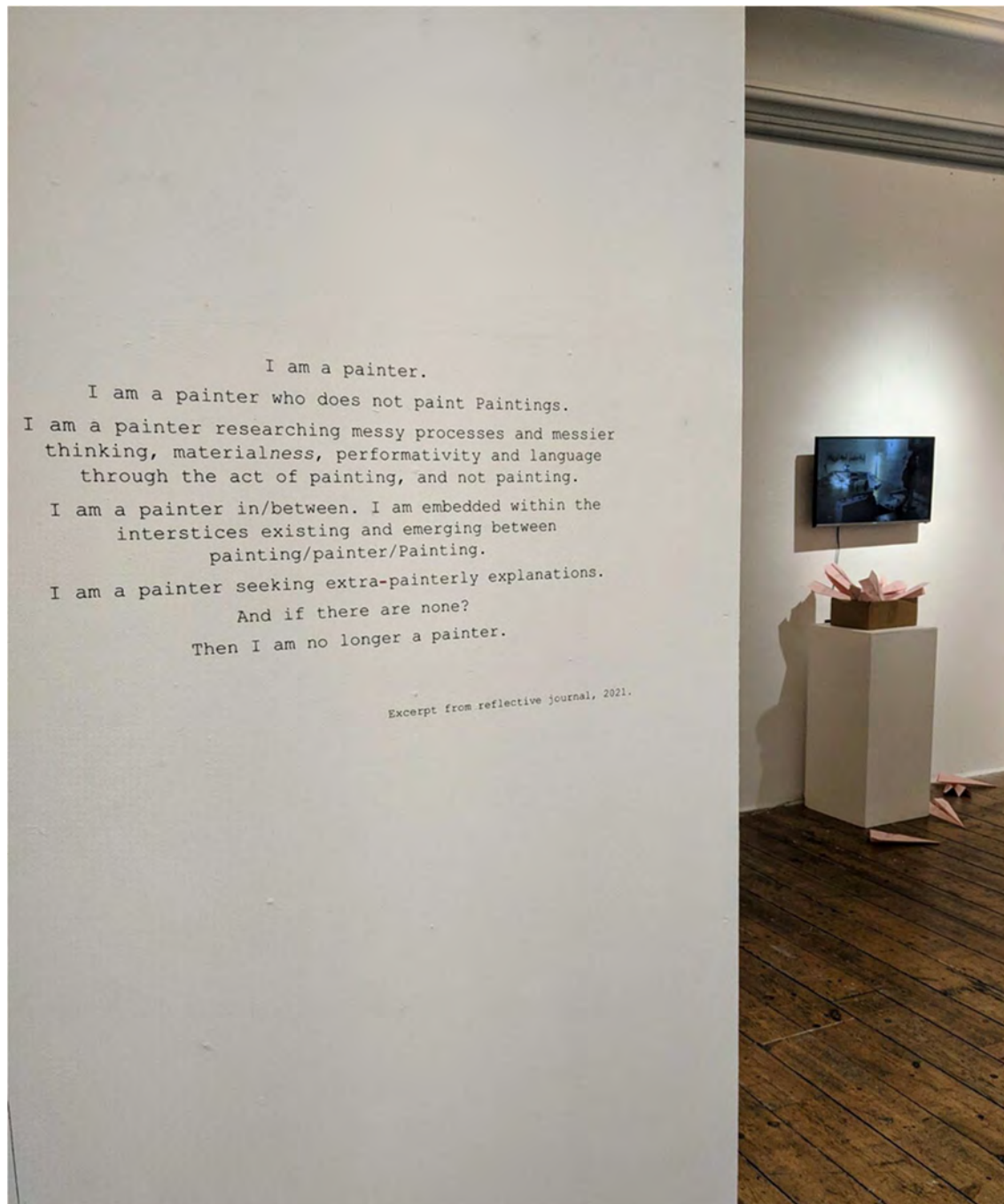


Figure 99 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 100 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 101 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 102 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.

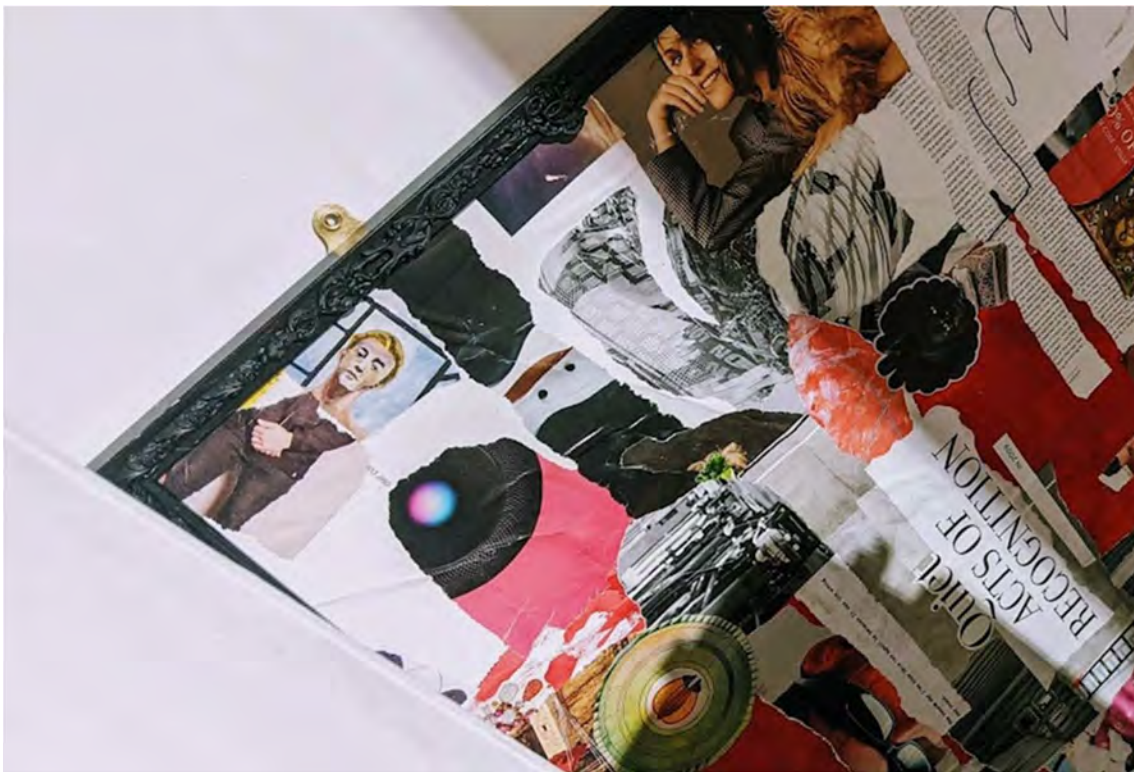


Figure 103 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 104 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 105 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 106 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 107 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. Installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.



Figure 108 Sally Bailey, exhibition/exposition. De-installation view, Birmingham School of Art, 2021.

Adieu.

Epilogue

I am a painter.

I am a painter who does not paint Paintings.

I am a painter researching messy processes and messier thinking, materialness, performativity and language through the act of painting, and not painting.

I am a painter in/between. I am embedded within the interstices existing and emerging between painting/painter/Painting.

I am a painter seeking extra-painterly explanations.

And if there are none?

Then I am no longer a painter.

Excerpt from reflective journal, 2021.