

PHIL
LAMBERT

DRAFT

THE WHITEHEAD
PROJECT

VERSION



A. N. Whitehead's philosophy of prehension and his radical notion of feeling were described in his book 'Process and Reality' (1929). It states that perception is not a second hand representation of the world, but is a concrete manifestation of an occasion's relational engagement with reality. It is not something that distinguishes the organic and inorganic, but is simply a matter of degree.

Whitehead and Hill made bricks in Cwmbran between 1925 and the 1970's. My house is made of these bricks and I discovered this whilst reading A. N. Whitehead in 2016.

Rather than impose my will on the brick, or exploit the brick to create an Artwork that is more about me, this project involved a conversation with the brick as an equal. This involved listening to and caring for the brick, its impact on us and its history in industrial and geological time frames.

The project is ongoing and has involved investigations into themes as wide ranging as Archaeology, clay, pigment, Geology and Philosophy.

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The Whitehead Project

With Thanks to:

Charles and Sally at Nantgarw China Works Museum, NadaMakes, Jonathan Powell at Elysium
and Beep Wales in Swansea and of course, as always, Sian Williams

What is Painting?

Where to begin?... What is it not? What should it be or what does it need to be?

Why do we paint? One simple explanation could be simply because we want to. I like it so I should paint.

This may well be the case for a good many people, and in some way is inevitably always true, but is it enough? As a child and as student, I think it probably was. However now I have a family, responsibilities and commitments and I am forced to ask the question of why spend time doing something that, if it is just because I like it, is essentially selfish.

Is it Professional?

Is painting commercially sustainable in Wales? In my experience... no - not in any medium to long-term fashion.

Therefore the idea of painting as a commercial activity, either as fine art product, as a cheaper mass-market product or entertainments industry is hard to justify. The relationship between audience and artist is there, in part, but images are easily accessible and have no real value in the digital age.

The exponentially higher expertise needed for the quality and training in painting cannot be justified by the prices the market is willing to pay for decoration. Especially given the competition from cheap high quality digital printing.

To illustrate this, I have been in a situation where I could not afford an artists work or their limited edition prints and so I quietly took a photograph. Which I then had digitally printed and hung up in our living room – it looks very nice, even if it lacks some of the qualities of an original and clearly breaks copyright. (I would argue it has benefitted the artist in terms of exposure ...sort of...)

In 2014, DACS (Design and Artists Copyright Society) released figures, which reveal that the national median wage for a fine artist in 2010 was only £10,000 - less than half of the average UK salary. So even when including the disproportionately successful, overall an artist's wage is well below the equivalent full time annual salary for minimum wage, which is around £13k. Of course the reality is few do it full time, but even so the financial rewards are unlikely to match the time put in.

Only the very small minority of financially successful artists are exempt from this, drawing their income from corporations, museums, and the international Art market. Access to this market from Wales seems limited – currently and historically.

With the increasing numbers of Art students being accepted on BA courses nationally, I would expect average earnings and quality to drop further. Despite the watch of the Competitions and Marketing Authority, there does seem to be some evidence of some HE Institutions suggesting that courses can give access to a professional artist status, particularly at MA level. I think this is unjustifiable and I am not sure that the idea of the Fine Arts as professional is beneficial anyway.

There could be a case that Government studentships, subsidies, grants and the high value we place on the arts is only exacerbating this. Driving more people to take the gamble, thereby reducing the resources-per-head for their development and their sustainability, whilst increasing the sustainability and number of staff in the supporting networks.

The issue is complicated by the difficulty in ascribing and defining quality in the emerging visual arts - another sensitive subject addressed later. If the issue of quality is being avoided, then there are no natural barriers to prevent the system bloating. Escalating numbers on Fine Arts degree programmes and the removal of the requirement to have Foundation (or its equivalent) in some colleges, gives me cause for concern...

Identity Sells?

One thing that is a valuable commodity in the digital age is identity. From the rise of Arts YouTuber's to the trade in reproductions and 'knock-off' T-shirt prints, there is commerce in selling an identity and there is no doubt that the Artist (as creative and liberated figure – a bohemian perhaps) is a sellable identity.

Artists are literally 'iconic'. From Rembrandt to Dali, Van Gogh or Hirst and Hockney, artists (dead or alive, but usually dead) have always been used and marketed as identities. In many ways this has always happened and artists were the prototypes for the current trend in identity marketing. Think of the legendary tales of Picasso, or whoever, knocking out a quick sketch on a napkin to pay for his meal.

It is therefore possible that an artist's media identity can carry the message and value within the work. Placing the focus not on the work itself, but in all the other actions of the artist. Perhaps this has yet to be fully explored by emerging artists, but it is certainly a feature of celebrity culture.

Although... as mentioned, identity in the arts is not new. Perhaps, we are in fact looking at this the wrong way?

If for a moment we stop thinking that emerging artists are the producers and the public are the consumers then we can begin to see another relationship based on identity. One where the emerging artists are the market and the Art institutions are the producers of identity.

I think, many emerging artists succumb to the fantasy of the artistic identity and are seduced by the dreams of becoming a Dali or Picasso. These dreams are reinforced endlessly through an Arts education that deifies the names and works of the Masters. Rarely, if ever, do curricula suggest that we should actually disengage with other artists and explore a unique response to our current times. Instead pupils and students spend most of their time learning to imitate the range of styles

produced by other artists and an idea that you can make Art¹ is promoted. I'm not sure that anyone person really controls what becomes Art.

Interestingly, in some ways, they are freer to explore individual potential within the context of design. Here it's less about following in the footsteps of Masters, but then they have the comfort of being able to assess quality according to its function.

If I am right, then students are sold an identity or a dream. Higher Education, Visual Arts Institutions, artist materials suppliers, middling artists and the rest of the small to medium gallery infrastructure are supported through the investment of emerging artists in their time and their money.

For the emerging artists this is often a high stakes gamble that only the young or independently wealthy would be foolish enough to invest in, an investment that rarely ever repays reliably over any length of time as we have already seen.

Of course this might explain why there is also a significant effect on **access** to the visual arts, with low-income families effectively being prevented from entering the arts due to lack of resources or potential resources. Leaving the cliché of risk-taking younger siblings of middle and upper class families and, more recently, the comfortably retired as the only people who can. This then has knock on concerns when art tries too hard to be socially responsible or 'relevant' to a wider audience in order to define its function and justify funding. It can look daft, hypocritical or even exploitative.

What is Good Art?

An image is just that – an image. In effect, an empty vessel until it interacts with a viewer. It doesn't matter that we the artist are supposedly more skilled or trained in reading and constructing images; after all it is the viewer's skill level and experiences that determines their very personal response, not the artists.

There are many viewers and many different approaches to deconstructing images and constructing meaning. All this makes value judgements difficult for industry insiders and the public alike. If you want Banksy reproductions or paintings by baby elephants on your walls, who am I to say that that is wrong? And I confess in the right mood I would find them interesting too.

We want art to be more than just an image. It is supposed to have a 'higher' purpose of some sort. We want it to stand for the heights of human creativity, speak of social injustice, hope for the future, environmental concerns, beauty, love etc. etc. Rarely can an image effectively do this, unless it is aimed at some already apparent visual understanding or given a definition / purpose by an institution. So, I mistrust the communicative function of Art. For me this is what separates Art from Design. Design is judged on its ability to communicate or function. Art is not. Rarely, in

¹ Given the choice of making 'art' like Albrecht Durer and making art like Kandinsky, I can see why pupils and teachers opt for the later. That's is not to say that one is better than the other, just that if making art is the aim, then it make sense to do this in the easiest possible way. Why over complicate?

² I believe that a truly interdisciplinary approach would be better at HE. Inspired by my interdisciplinary Bioscience course in Human Science at UCL I think students should pick modules

my belief, does art communicate reliably between artist and audience. For me this is enough to discount any theory of art based on communication, but I know there are those who will disagree. Clearly art communicates a range of things to different people. I doubt that communication between the artist and the audience is central to its existence.

Art is many things to different people in different contexts and cultures. There are probably almost as many personal perspectives on why we produce Art, as there are artists. In fact, a quick survey around the diverse personal perspectives on Art from producers and consumers indicates that it's probably not possible to define a core root of Art that encompasses all the benefits to the practising individuals and the roles it can play in society.

Unfortunately, it is also not a question that can be avoided by the practising individuals or by society. Without a definition of Art, and without some form of function, there can be no justification for public funding or public time. Added to this, it becomes very difficult for artists, and curators or institutions, to make value judgements about their work.

Yet, despite this, the Arts are full of people telling us that one Artwork is better than another. What criteria are being used for these judgements? For example, a quick comparison between 'Art and Design' syllabuses and those of other subjects at primary and secondary levels demonstrates that there is comparatively very little specific content in Art and Design. Most of the subject specific skills in Art and Design could easily be applied to other subjects.

With the exception of the Coldstream reports in the 60s and 70's, the arts institutions have tended to stay silent on this issue. These reports were an ambitious attempt to resolve issues like these and affirm the academic basis of Modernist Arts. Unfortunately, this was an uncomfortable marriage of subjectively assessed studio practice and more objectively assessed academic essay writing in Art History. A historical approach was always bound to miss the mark with at least half the students.

The Post-Modern critical theories of the 80's and 90's rightly questioned the institutions for their white, middle class, heterosexual middle-aged patriarchy. Astutely exposing the isolated, archaic and irrelevant vehicles for constructing truths and value. Art History was, at the time, particularly vulnerable to this critique. After all, whose history was it? An academic trend emerged where the most valid approach was one of critique of the institutions. However valid and well intentioned this move was, it was also an awkward reversal of the usual student – master relationship².

The silence from the colleges and particularly the galleries is understandable. They need to maintain the widest audience possible for their sustainability, do not want to box themselves in and want to be in a position where they can try and be everything to everyone, However, this leaves them open to suggestions of cronyism, low-standards, exploitation, inconsistency, poor value-for-money and irrelevance – even if that is genuinely not the case.

² I believe that a truly interdisciplinary approach would be better at HE. Inspired by my interdisciplinary Bioscience course in Human Science at UCL I think students should pick modules from other courses at the institution to match their interests. These modules would be assessed and taught by tutors on those courses with students from those courses, thereby maintaining standards and encouraging an exchange of ideas on a level academic playing field.

From a distance

Despite the difficulties in defining art, many have tried - usually from the relative safety of other disciplines, such as the Biosciences, Psychology, Art History, Philosophy or Social Sciences. All of them have their weaknesses and strengths. All probably have some truth and each deserves a fuller examination than I can give here.

One of my favourites, for its stupendous reductive simplicity, as well as (paradoxically) its possible reflection in some of the artists I have met, is Geoffrey Millers's Sexual Selection theory.

Briefly, this theory is based on Charles Darwin's later Sexual Selection theory, which suggested that the fundamental need to appeal to a mate and pass on genes could drive extreme phenotypic and behavioural adaptations, such as elaborate mating rituals, the Peacock's tail or the bright colours of a Baboon in season. Miller points out that the Bower Bird constructs a nest and then decorates this with whatever blue things it can find to make it more attractive to the female. Leading Miller to suggest that artists (and presumably collectors as well) are decorating their nests and drawing attention to themselves as potential mates.

In support of his theory, Miller points out that the history of art and the museum collections are heavily biased towards males in their peak reproductive years. It is a well thought-through theory, but of course there is very little way of testing it and other explanations are available. Western Society has been a patriarchy and female creativity may have been just as relevant, but ignored. So the male bias is likely to be cultural rather than biological. Although, separating cultural and biological in humans is nigh on impossible.

The mating drive could cover a range of ego driven motivations, not just directly about sex, but social standing, genius or intelligence (right to influence), but what do we mean by this? Are we just saying that it gives us something to talk about and makes us feel better about ourselves? Well, where is the harm in that and isn't that true of any skill? What is specific about Art or painting in particular?

That said, I do have a fondness for this theory and wish it to be true in some way. Also, this theory works from an individual basis, which I think is a better fit for the actual activity of making than some of the social models. Although, my 'nest' was never that appealing and my partner doesn't particularly like art. Even less so now that it takes time away from the family.

There are other Biological, Psychological and Neuroscientific theories about Art that I won't go into here. They often draw from theories on our evolutionary heritage and sensory development. Zeki and Ramachandran are noticeable among many others. The problem is that most of these theories end up looking plausible. Demonstrating that there really isn't anything concrete to back them up either.

Staying with a Life Science theme, Anthropologists have also faced the question of what is Art. From their perspective, they have to decide what if anything unites the pan-cultural human behaviour to make and decorate apparently functionless objects, which assume high cultural value. Are they even the same activity? Ellen Dissanyake thinks so, and produced a theory about

the nature of Art being 'to make special', a sort of bold or italic print for human communities. A way of emphasising something that was already there, but needed its significance marked. This seems very credible, if a little unspecific. The act of calling something Art and placing it in a frame, reverential space or gallery definitely makes something 'special' and draws attention. Clearly this is a cultural model which states that Arts importance lies in its community function. However, I am not sure that this encompasses all the motivations for actually creating the work - after all some may be very functional (ready-mades) and not created as Art despite becoming such, others may not be socially connected at all.

Another Life Sciences theory well worth having a quick look at is Memetics or Cultural Evolution. The origins of Memetics (at least in recent lineage) date back to Richard Dawkins. Who in the final chapter of his seminal book on genetics 'The Blind Watchmaker' introduced a speculative and challenging idea that all reproducing systems could operate under the same blind mechanisms as genetic evolution. These are over-production, variation and selection according to the environment. In particular, he singled out human cultural evolution and coined the term 'meme' for a single cultural idea that could form a 'memplex' and evolve as it passed through its human environment – just like a gene in a natural environment.

The idea has waxed and waned over the decades since the book was published. The significance of the idea being that it questions human autonomy and proposes a simple and elegant solution that is unsettling in its stark denial of human influence. (Read Dennet for the logical philosophical conclusions of this idea.) However, the theory has been problematic, first due to the difficulties in defining a cultural unit, and then in its direct analogy of genetic evolution. Contemporary theories of cultural evolution have travelled some way from this starting point.

Theories by the likes of Mazudi, Richardson and Boyd still look for a reductive and simple explanation for cultural change based on evolutionary principles, but now they are supported by mathematical modelling of the expected patterns of change and a more nuanced idea of how cultural variants are selected. This works along the lines of a suite of evolved innate social learning heuristics, which determine our reaction to novel situations. For instance, copy the most popular trait, copy the most dominant individuals behaviour or the opposite of those behaviours etc.

I must admit I am naturally drawn to reductive theories. It seems the sensible place to start from. Why introduce something more complex or as indefinable as human agency, a spirit or conscious essence if it is not needed to explain things? OK, they may turn out to be wrong, but at least we are building foundations on firm ground.

I am particularly drawn to the Cultural Evolution arguments as they define the system that produces Art rather than what Art is. So in that sense, it can encompass Mithen, Dissanyake and the rest, alongside moments such as church patronage in the Renaissance, semiotics and Constructionism, American Cold War national identity issues in Pop and Abstract Expressionism or any fluctuations in the institutional trends for art definitions. It is a blind process creating historically contingent complexes of influence and meaning within cultures and sub-cultures. I think this perspective is really important broad basis for understanding the arts and cuts through some of the crap.

The problem is, this theory can explain how things change, but makes the question of why we are doing it irrelevant. According to this theory, it is simply because it is adaptive and historically contingent. There is no purpose, no good and no bad, there just is. It doesn't really help here.

Summary

So, after all this we are really no clearer. What we do know, is that no one feels particularly comfortable defining Art or painting.

Art has varied massively over time and cultures, but the actual act of painting or making has been remarkably consistent. This is at odds with diversity that would be expected from any fast adapting blind cultural system. The form painting takes and its function are likely evolving and adapting all the time, but the act itself seems more ingrained and fundamental to being human. So, Art could be socially orientated and painting might not be.

Some might argue I should not separate painting and Art. To my mind something only becomes Art after it has been made and presented in the right context, but admittedly things may be more complicated than that. Either way, I think what is significant about painting is that people would do it anyway, even if they were not connected to human society. This is difficult to test, but the inhospitable, likely dangerous and inaccessible locations of some of the cave art suggests that there is some possibility that painting may not be produced for other people at all.

This very personal motivation for painting could be key in trying to find a suitable definition that allows artists and educators to define their practise in isolation from the vagaries of Art and prescriptive functional requirements of design.

So in summary, painting is not about sales. Painting can be used to create an identity, but this is not specific to painting. There is an audience for painting. People seem to value it, and claim that it provides a range of benefits to them. However, this seems to be divorced from the intentions and motivations of the artist. Furthermore the audience are not prepared to invest the sums needed to sustain it financially (a problem of the digital age that has echoes in the sustainability of music and film as well), and perhaps emotionally too.

At its most valuable, painting can be a socially agreed contract wherein arbitrary value is allocated to particular items in order to lubricate high-end financial and social transactions. But this is rare when seen in the wider context. I don't think this explains what the artist gets from making it and it is not vital or intrinsic to the act of painting.

Painting definitely gives something to the artist. It could be an ego trip, a listen to me, aren't I important statement or wouldn't I make a good lover? But, isn't this largely due to the valued social status of the artist arising from certain historical precursors or applicable to any other developed skill?

What I can be sure about is that plenty of people want to paint even if they are not entirely sure why.

I suggest that it is best viewed primarily as a system of self-development and engagement with the world. Performing the function of Goethe's slow and careful observation in his Goethean Scientific method, where we resist imposing conclusions, but 'learn to look' and 'look to learn' instead. It's hard to imagine being able to pay attention to the world in any great detail without developing and sustaining the looking, learning and recording skills involved in painting and drawing. Although, this harks back to what is now a very unfashionable view on the function of education as having a primary purpose of self-development, rather than vocation.



Whitehead Cwmbran Football Team 1949/50 season. (Colours Red and White)

The Whitehead Project



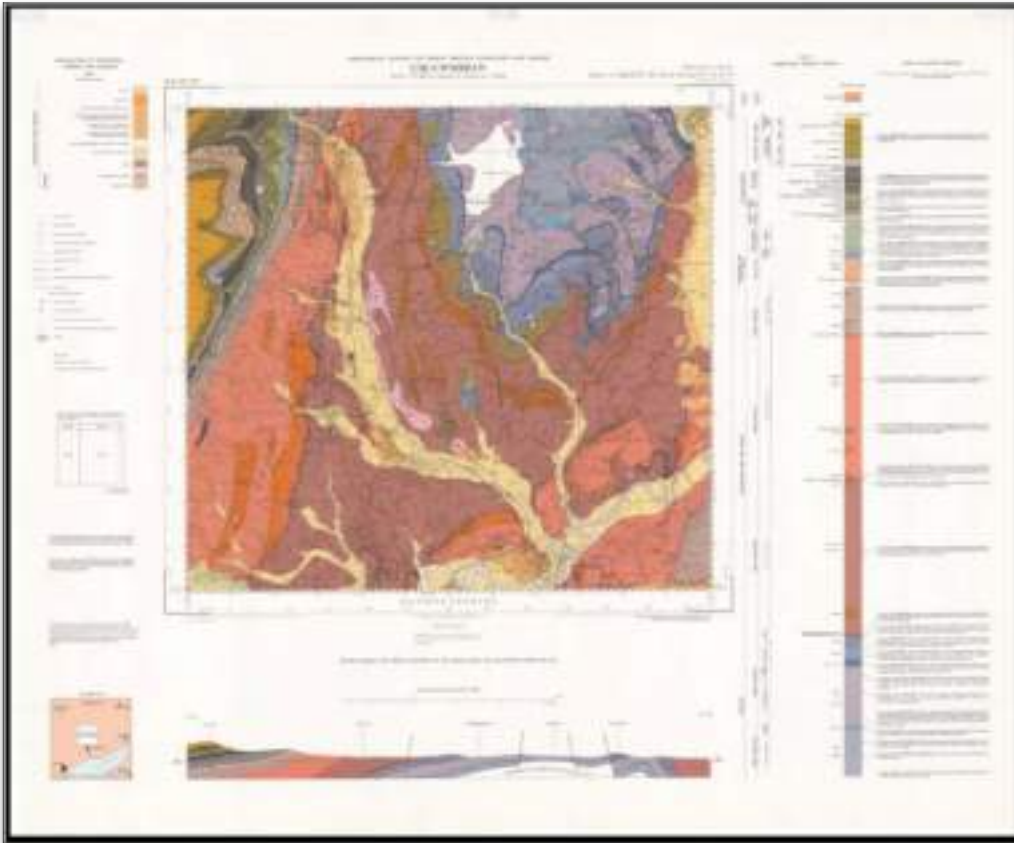
In order to pick my way through these questions, I deconstructed painting. Separated out artist, object and audience, pigment, binder and surface. What happens if I am left with no art world, no paints and no tools? Do I still want to paint? What intuitive decisions are made and what do we learn in the process?

This is not deconstruction for deconstructions sake, but more an effort to '**Reconstruct**' painting. After all, deconstructing something teaches you very little. Reconstructing something teaches you a whole lot more.

The first thing that becomes apparent is that I still want to paint. Painting for the sake of painting seems empty though. For a while I am stuck, of all the things in the world or all the limits of my imagination what if anything should be painted? Why and for what aim? I mean, I could easily sit in some blue paint and make a Klein bum print, do a Hirst spin painting or laboriously make a detailed painted copy of a photograph or an apple, but why? I need a reason.

I was saved by a coincidence between a brick and a philosopher. Firstly this co-incidence was so marked, finding a brick with the name of the author of the book you are reading in a house, which turns out, to be made from bricks all bearing his name. Secondly Whitehead's philosophy tries not to prioritise the human view of the world. His emotional theory of interaction set up the basis for a philosophy of **Deanthropocisation**, as contemporary 'New Materialist' philosophers now call it. According to this view, if I want to make something of this co-incidence then I could just as well let the brick decide.

So that is what I did. I let the brick tell me its story, about its origins in geological time, its location in our time, history and society. I try to record this as best I could and map out the relationships, and in doing this I began to paint. The painted map informs the conversation with the brick and illustrates the connections. It is in and of the moment. The painting formed the responses in the conversation as well as recording bricks story. Prompting enquiries with local amateur archaeologists, previously unknown ceramics organisations and many more.



I do the obvious things. I collect soil samples and extract the clay. I make prints from the bricks. Gradually our conversation develops and my voice is heard as I talk about pigments and combine the red clay with oils to make paints. This seems to make sense. Why would I paint a brick with any other pigment?



In the act of representing the brick with paint made from its own clay I am drawn to think on a range of other artists who have worked with bricks, for example, Jason Davies' exhibition of interactive paper folding bricks or Craig Wood's brick motifs. Then of course there is Donald Judd and Carl Andre's standardised brick units. I think about the brick as the perfect modern unit.

A simple unit that is repeated to form any structure, with identity and difference formed out of singular featureless atomic units.



Only, unlike contemporary bricks, these bricks are not featureless or standardised. Each one is stamped with a maker's mark, a local makers mark. Each brick carries the patina and knocks that tell of a slightly different history. They are all unique. Perhaps this has been the failure of Modernism. To recognise that standardised atomic units are only an abstraction. They don't exist. It's complexity and interaction the whole way down. I talk to an architect about making buildings from local materials and calculating the true costs of building (and their deconstruction).

So, in the end I have created a painting – of sorts – a project with many elements, which has been framed. Every element was done for a reason, as a part of the conversation with the brick. A conversation which feels now like it is gradually reaching its end. I have learnt a lot from this brick. It is harder to determine if the brick has been as altered by me... Maybe I am more plastic. Time will tell.

I now believe that without **representation** there is no painting³. There has to be something to say, something to draw attention to and represent through a visual form. But... this is not necessarily representation for an audience or a traditional like for like representation. It is not the creation of a 'similar' or replica as Plato might have conceived it, when he banished artists from the republic.

³ N.B. I must also clarify that representation does not mean traditionalism. It is unquestionable an academic approach to painting. I'm not denouncing abstraction or any other ism. I am just reaffirming extended representation as a core function of painting. Many abstract and conceptual works are of course representational, even if not representing objects. I draw no distinction between objects and ideas here.



This highlights a difficulty with my choice of words that I must explain. I assume that to represent, originates from to 're-present' or to give again. This implies something that is not in the moment or of the moment. It is a simulacra or empty repetition, perhaps a reminder at best. No wonder Plato held artists in such low esteem on this basis.

However, when I say representation I do not mean to re-present at all. For me, representation is the equal interaction between two entities. At every level from the particular to molecular, nano, micro and macro, interacting entities always represent each other. I think here I am referring to

Whitehead's 'Prehension', in as much as interacting entities are in some way conscious of each other. But pre-hension does not seem quite the right word in this context, and the route that I have taken to get here suggests to me that a redefinition of representation makes sense and references the act of engaging with an object. Needless to say, that this is very much of the moment and about the moment. In fact, I suggest that representation, as I understand it might actually be the moment.



The clay resting on the wooden bench learns about the grain of the wood and its thirst, as equally the wood learns about the clay's moisture content, mass and particle size. They are both equally changed and informed of each other, and there is a representation, which results from and informs this. It is integral. Quite literally in this case as the clay will carry the imprint of the table surface and the table will be swollen and wetted by the clay.



So a representation, I think, is key to any interaction. The length and significance of this representation governs the degree of learning – mutual change. (Notice here I am not distinguishing between conscious entity, organic or inorganic.) When we carry out the act of painted (or drawn) representation of an object we are forced into a slow engagement with that object, person, landscape etc.

When the pioneering Geologists marched of into the land to prospect they took with them sketchbooks as well as the other aids, as did the Biologists and Botanists. Through the extended conversation they had with the landscape they became aware of its properties and history. Experimentation itself is also a series of representations. The prospectors were changed, and as we know, so was the landscape.

Ideally painting this moment should not be an attempt to create something for a later purpose, such as commercial sales or recognition, or a reminder of an earlier event, but an important act in itself. It is not re-presenting something but an act of representation. Allowing it to inform... and maybe the slower the better. Representation is not one entity becoming the other or manipulating the other, but is one entity sympathising with another.

In painting and drawing for that matter, this slow intense or repeated engagement produces a mental state - sometimes referred to as 'reverie'. I'm not going to try and interpret these very subjective moments too much, but I think it is safe to say that we loose our ego, or consciousness, in those moments.

(Mindfulness? I'm not sure... actually we are becoming mindless)

We become unaware of ourselves. In this moment the distance or separation between the external world and ourselves collapses and we become connected to the external world as equals. The relationship is of two interacting lumps of organic and inorganic material colliding in a web of complex material and immaterial reactions that define a place and a time – a moment or node. I'm drawing heavily from Whitehead, De Landa and Bennet here. (Perhaps Deleuze also, but I am less familiar).

I think this '**dumb interaction**' is important. I think it is in the 'dumb interaction' that we become intimate with our surroundings rather than aloof. It is in this intimacy that we learn more about our external world and, equally, about ourselves. We escape our own expectations and preconceived limitations.

So when I talk about representation I am not talking about it as an end in itself, a shutter click or thumb press, but as a **process**: A process of engagement, intimacy, adaptation and, perhaps also, improvement. The painting must in some way be about the process to escape the simulacra. (This is a different challenge in the digital age where images appear and disappear at the speed of light and the processes are usually hidden.)



So in short, I believe now that painting is a form of **extended representation**.

Its not the hard-won conscious battle of career, nor is it the soft and gentle dreams that flitter by without leaving a trace. It is a fundamental process of engaging with and understanding the world externally and internally through extending unconscious representation. "Hear, Read, Mark, Learn and Inwardly Digest" to borrow a phrase from the scriptures. Not creativity (whatever that is?), Not sexual (as my biologist friends may think) not commercial, not Art (whatever that is?), not Spiritual (whichever that is?) nor meaningless, but something basic and important.

A human process.