

BA Photography in The Arts: Contextual Practices

Research In Practice (ADAD5004)

Essay: Proposal

Word count: 2,285 + Bibliography

Nia Jane Elliott (2204471)

Illustration List

Fig 1. Dalí, S (1931). *The Persistence of Memory*. [Painting].

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

Fig 2. Parr, M (2004). *The Photobook: A history Volume I*. [Photobook].

<https://www.martinparrfoundation.org/product/the-photobook-a-history-volume-i-signed/>

Fig 3. Vo, D (2013). *I M U U R 2*. [Collection]

<https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/gallery/4361/magnificent-obsessions-the-artist-as-collector/9>

Within this essay, I will be expanding upon some of the key-word concepts to which I feel closely connected within my practice and touching upon some of the reasoning behind my emphasis of the importance of their acknowledgement within the artistic community. Following loosely the direction of the artistic development process, I will be discussing the environment within which an artist may receive inspiration, and as such the methodology that they might choose to follow in order to nurture these ideas. Alongside this, I will be considering the resultant outward appearance that individuals observing artworks sometimes have of these artistic making processes and the misconceptions that these judgements often lead to. I will also pose the contrasting perspectives upon the perceived 'value' of collecting and possessing practice-relevant materials by artists, and the relativity of the definition placed on the term 'value' when used under these circumstances.

Whim

Whilst the making and methodologies of many artists rests upon the existence of well-developed acts of strategy and practicality, extensive note-taking and organised schedules, it must not be forgotten that one of the most important skills in an artist's arsenal, remains to be the 'artistic whim'. Its importance often unintentionally overlooked, the act of spontaneously 'doing' as the primary response is what arguably subconsciously distinguishes an individual as an artist to begin with. Whilst many may not feel a particular affection towards my choice of *Whim* to define this theory, I believe it to be the most productive explanation of what we otherwise refer to as 'artistic instinct' – and whilst this term might feel true for some, I feel that the reflexes and responses of artists, do exist as both 'instinctual' and intentional, conscious choices and as such should be defined under wider

terminology. Notably, I intend to follow the definition of *Whim*, a decidedly alternative term to its close cousin 'whimsical', the use of which would be, in this instance, counter-productive and incorrect. Confronted by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his essay *Self Reliance* (Emerson, 1841), this concept of specifying *whim* over *whimsical*, was my initial introduction to closer examining my own use of the terms. Emerson writes of the whim as an intentional, fateful incident as opposed to a simply jovial occurrence, as Sandra Morris discusses within her own essay on the topic, "the vital connection between the whimsical as playful impulse and the whimsical as what Emerson and other Romantics trusted above all--intuition and imagination" (Morris, 2013). Therefore, following his intentional use of *whim* over *whimsical* as a result, I feel that abiding by this logic would make the most sense within my own definition and usage.

The term 'instinct' used to describe the beginnings of the creative process of an artist, suggests the returning to a familiar or natural pattern – as if following the direction of some inevitable habitual compass. This phrasing, whilst for a great number of artists may feel true to their practices, seems to me, an incredibly limiting means of considering the source of any artwork. The suggestion that the motion to produce a body of work comes from an inherited, necessary impulse, for me does not conjure up quite the romanticised image of a 'natural talent' as likely intended, but rather infers that the work of the given artist was an act of unavoidable fate. On the contrary, from this simple train of thought alone, the use of the term *Whim* as an alternative depicts a much wider spectrum of inspiration and intention.

Discussed by Linda Katherine Apps within her paper on artistic process, she notes that whilst not overlooking the making process and choice of base subject of an artwork, arguably the

single most important aspect of any artistic venture is *how* they might come across their inspiration. Apps points out “Discovering a subject is not merely the cementing of concentrated facts and events. It is an activity that must be impassioned and energized by emotion, by a personal truth that has captured and suspended the artist in epiphany, recognition, curiosity that triggers an emotionally-driven response.” (Apps, 2007) Following this direction of thinking, we must consider the discovery and inspiration process as an experience, an encounter that one might connect with, rather than simply an *idea* that one happens upon. The term ‘trigger’ suggesting once again that rather than this response occurring from some inevitable primal origin – as insinuated within the phrase ‘artistic instinct’ – the reaction that takes place within the mind of an artist is indeed one of dynamic intuition and infinitely diverse whim. For every individual, this ‘trigger’ will present itself as something different, having endlessly varying emotional, physical and often distinctly personal repercussions within the work that follows.

Idiosyncrasies

What is often found – and what I have observed within my own creative practice – is that what commonly follows after the encounter of a given whim, is the action of creative making. Whilst this process – as previously discussed – can for many exist as well organised, structured and calculated events, as well as impulsive, peculiar and often intense behaviours, it is nevertheless incredibly common for the workings of the artist in this stage to be perceived as abnormal or peculiar despite which of these categories one may lean closer towards. It is this perception of the process that I will be referring to as ‘idiosyncrasies’. Defined in the Cambridge Dictionary as “having strange or unusual habits,

ways of behaving, or features” (Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, 2024)

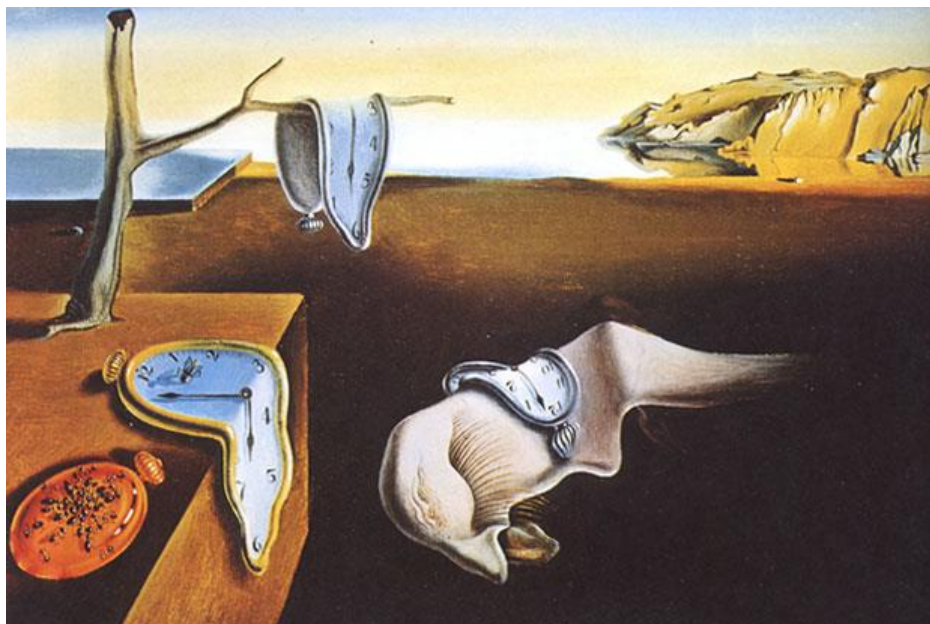
The mindset of ‘thinking creatively’ or ‘creative problem solving’ is a concept that predates the existence of categorising produced results as ‘art’. Cave paintings were brought into existence as a method of recounting and documenting the world that their makers were experiencing, telling stories and conveying detail in a way that no other medium at the time could achieve, in a manner that resonated perfectly with its intended audience. This was art that was not intended to be judged, valued or even considered to exist for longer than its initial viewing; its only purpose was to *be created*, whilst all other benefits such as storytelling and documentation, were a convenient bonus that followed. As time passed, artistic process began to organise itself into categories – painters developed their methods just as sketch artists, playwrights, poets and later photographers would do, each with purposeful differences that distinguished each individual practice as their own. Throughout history, veering from the ‘conventional’ or ‘typical’ processes of one’s art practice was considered improper and radical rather than progressive or unique, leaving many artists feeling so trapped in stereotype that they refused to follow their artistic whim. Art has never existed as exclusively linear practice, however, there have remained particularly prominent individuals in recent history whose work has proven significant in the breaking of metaphorical barriers that previously existed.

An example of this occurrence is the work of Salvador Dalí. Most famously known for his paintings of ‘painted dream photographs’ depicting melting clocks, exaggerated humanoid figures and peculiar warped versions of reality, Dalí’s surrealist work whilst hugely popular was widely regarded as simply an extension of his ‘craziness’. In her article for Elsevier,

Caroline Murphy discusses the variation of opinions regarding Dalí's outward appearance as 'crazy' and 'mad', commenting "opinions are generally split. Individuals either perceive the artist to have been a bizarre and mentally disturbed individual, or a compulsive and manipulative liar who feigned his own madness in order to gain success". (Murphy, 2009)

Following this, Murphy goes on to report on the findings of Götz and Götz (Götz K. O., 1979), entitled *Personality Characteristics of Professional Artists*, within which the findings indicate that the personality traits of artists compared with non-artists were more radical and expressive personality traits, however it was discovered that this was not linked to the level of relative success of the artists. Instead, this study revealed that the personality of the artist "was shown to reflect how successful they had been in aggressively promoting their work" (Murphy, 2009). This directly displays the importance of following one's unique whim through personal choice of narrative. Whilst talent is important, it is not the sole factor in deciding the success of the work produced; the physical and mental process that an artist chooses to adhere to – both prior, during and following creation – is the primary aspect of achieving in art. "Talent is needed but, also a capacity to survive the 'fleeting whims of taste, fashion, or claims as to their truth or value, in order to make one's products of originality a success". (Murphy, 2009)

(Fig. 1)



Having considered this concept, we can return to the career of Dalí, and the opinions on his widely discussed mental state. Whether this outward appearance was one put on for show or a genuine aspect of his natural personality, one must wonder whether even before the consideration of the opinions on the artwork he produced; was it in fact the artist's idiosyncratic projection into the public eye that truly set him onto the path for success?

Idiosyncrasies, or whichever parallel term one might prefer to assign to their practice, remain an integral element of creative progression. In my experience, engaging with an eclectic mind is often a far more interesting and rewarding experience than a conversation with an individual who is unwilling to colour outside of the lines, so to speak. The development and pioneering of newly discovered corners of the world of arts depend on artists who are brave enough to take initiative through ideas that they truly believe in, despite the possibility of being frowned-upon, overlooked or simply misunderstood.

Amassment

Amassment generally refers to the accumulation of a given item or items to form a collection of value. It is important to note that within this definition, I hope to steer away from the assignment of value to an item, situation or action based upon monetary worth, but rather judged by the level of sentimental or emotional value it may retain. This encompasses both the responses of the audience and the intentions and satisfaction of process and outcome of the artist responsible. The alleged or 'typical' success of a project or body of work is usually gathered from these two general responses, which highlights the direct link built between perceived value and perceived success, before one even considers monetary details.

To begin, I will separate this term into two, slightly more digestible parts; the collection and its value. *Value* will remain a highly subjective term in these instances, due to its application to a similarly subjective vocation – art. Collecting has been a shared trait amongst artists since around the mid-twentieth-century – in some instances earlier – and due to its particularly ‘obsessive’ origins, goes hand-in-hand with the aforementioned perceived idiosyncrasies in the art world. Whether used as a tool to inspire artistic whim and the resultant process, or serving as the artwork itself, the act of collecting proves to be a vital tool for many artists. When considered less as a curatorial measure and rather more a gather-and-accumulate action, some may begin to lack the vision for a purpose to this action. Whilst a collector of art is often steered by the monetary value of the work, an artistic collector sees a value often initially inequal to the economics of the item. Thus, *potential* forming a key aspect of amassment.

(Fig. 2)



Commenting on this topic that also directly influenced her own work, Louise Nevelson said “artists are born collectors” (Speaks, 2016), which I feel perfectly encapsulates the necessity of *amassment* as a neighbouring term. Photographer Martin Parr has often spoken of the obsessive nature of his relationship with collecting, stating in conversation with Magnum Photos that collecting is “a way of making sense of the world... a part of my DNA, whether I like it or not.” (Bourgeois-Vignon, 2017) Maybe the most well-known result of his drive to collect is his photobook collection – consisting of over 12,000 books – was in Parr’s own words, “worth millions”. (Mcelhearn, 2022) Understanding this impulse as an integral part of his role as an artist, Parr discusses the relationship between this and his practice within photography, declaring “his collecting motivations inseparable from his genealogy as a photographer”. (Rozental, 2012) Featuring alongside the likes of Damien Hirst and Danh Vo, selections from Parr’s collections were included in the 2015 exhibition at the Barbican Centre, entitled *Magnificent Obsessions: The Artist as Collector*, the aim of which was to highlight the role of collecting within the process of the artists. Discussing the ranging levels of application of collecting that can be observed through the work and workings of these artists, the exhibition provided insight into the “inspirations, influences, motives and obsessions of artists” (Barbican, 2016). This manner of visual guide through both the collections and resultant work produced by these artists, highlights the importance of understanding diversity within creative processes and the effect that these variations in approaches can have on work produced.

Considering these points in relation to the previously discussed ‘assigned value’ upon a given collection, it can be reasonably concluded that this method of Parr’s creative process is an incredibly valuable element of his work indeed – validating the application of the term

‘amassment’ in this instance, thus proposing the potential significance that amassment holds within artistic practice.

(Fig. 3)



Throughout this proposal, the expansion of these key terms and the use of their relative and fixed definitions has brought to light some interesting areas of study in relation to my own practice. The application of these terms to the artistic process and their influence upon both artist and viewer perception of the resultant work is an element I hope to further investigate and hopefully better understand in the coming year. Alongside this, I will pay considerable attention to the roles that these key words play within my own artistic process, and the way each of them are reflected within the work I produce. At present, the manner in which I have observed these elements within my practice can be simplified as follows; artistic whim will most likely lead to idiosyncrasies in some form or another, which in-turn will grant the

artistic community – both artist and audience – with an amassment, whether intentional or not. From this, a potential three-step ‘observation process’ may be drawn, which provides an ideal outline for the progression of this area of study moving forward. I will aim to follow this outline as I plan, produce and reflect upon my work, which will inevitably lead me to ask further, more specified questions, not just within my own process, but also about the role that my chosen key words play within the artistic community as a whole. As a result, the question I have proposed and will aim to expand upon within the coming year, will be formulated as follows;

“How does the *Artistic Whim* influence the motivation behind creative process, with regards deviation from the ‘typical’ or ‘familiar’ standards of procedure, and do these elements impact the assignment and perception of value of the work produced?”

Bibliography

Apps, L. K., 2007. *Artistic Process: Demystifying Art-Making*, Burnaby: Simon Fraser University.

Barbican, 2016. *Barbican*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.barbican.org.uk/whats-on/2015/event/magnificent-obsessions-the-artist-as-collector>

[Accessed 29 March 2024].

Bourgeois-Vignon, A., 2017. *Magnum Photos*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.magnumphotos.com/arts-culture/art/david-hurn-martin-parr-build-art-collection-swapping-prints/>

[Accessed 20 Feb 2024].

Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus , 2024. *Cambridge Dictionary*. [Online]

Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/idiosyncratic>

[Accessed 3 March 2024].

Emerson, R. W., 1841. *Self Reliance*. s.l.:s.n.

Götz K. O., G. K., 1979. Personality characteristics of professional artists. *Perceptual and Motor Skills*, 49(3), pp. 919-924.

Graham, M., 2015. *Another Magazine*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.anothermag.com/art-photography/gallery/4361/magnificent-obsessions-the-artist-as-collector/9>

[Accessed 27 March 2024].

Martin Parr Foundation, n.d. *Martin Parr Foundation*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.martinparrfoundation.org/product/the-photobook-a-history-volume-i-signed/>

[Accessed 14 April 2024].

Mcelhearn, K., 2022. *Pop Photo*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.popphoto.com/how-to/martin-parr-interview-collecting-photobooks/>

[Accessed 20 Feb 2024].

MoMA, 2019. *MoMA*. [Online]

Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79018>

[Accessed 16 March 2024].

Morris, S., 2013. *Whim upon the Lintel: Emerson's poetry and a politically ethical aesthetic*, s.l.: The Free Library.

Murphy, C., 2009. The link between artistic creativity and psychopathology: Salvador Dalí. *Elsevier*, 46(8), pp. 765-774.

Rozental, R., 2012. The camera and the collecting gene. *Philosophy of photography*, 3(2), pp. 349-357.

Speaks, E., 2016. *The Culture of Collecting'*, s.l.: Tate.