

THE CREATIVE PROCESS: FINDING YOUR ART PRACTICE¹

By Nelmarie du Preez (2007)

Introduction

As a student of the arts who wants to enter the creative world, whether it is as a visual artist or as a creative industry leader, it is important for you to establish a working methodology that is unique to your sensibilities, but also offers you a way of taking control of your time and artistic approach. Every artist develops their own style of working, or 'practice', which allows them to create art in a responsible way.

What do we mean when we say Art PRACTICE? We often hear professional lawyers or doctors refer to their overall work as a medical practice or a law practice. The same can be said for an artist who has been able to hone their craft and contain it within a set of qualities that defines their work.

After the Renaissance, for centuries artists mostly focused on the aesthetic value of their work. However, since the dawn of conceptual art, the idea of art-making as a practice details the way in which artists inform their work both through research and experimentation. It is about understanding that your visual creations have a certain cultural value and impact in the world and that critical thinking and self-awareness are equally as important as your technical skills. Art-making practices look at the intentions of an artist, and the techniques, strategies and processes they use to get to the finished "artwork". This means that the research that the artist conducts while making the work becomes as important as the skills used to create the work. As students it is your task to cultivate a particular practice, which allows you the space to be creative. Most creative practices are based on the same steps; however it is up to you to approach each step in your own unique creative way, that will allow your art practice to look different from your fellow students / artists.

¹ Essay developed for Unisa Study Material

Building an artistic practice stepwise

The following are examples of how most artists develop their ideas into final concrete artworks that are ready to be installed in public spaces. Each of these steps informs the next and allows you to both expand and narrow down your ideas. The process involves multiple cycles of expanding and narrowing down the focus of your work and research.

You will find that these steps will repeat themselves as the process develops.

Each step presented here is a part of the cycle. Whenever you become stuck in your process of making, it is useful to return to this step-by-step guide and repeat steps 2 to 5 with whatever you are working on. With each repetition of this cycle, you will expand your body of work and build towards your final examination.

STEP 1: Find the Spark!

As a student it is important that you open your mind to various things happening around you in the world. All artists are influenced by the things they surround themselves with, whether this is an obsession with video games, knitting or taking care of your family. Students often want to reach out to things that are outside of their immediate environment or field of interest, but often get overwhelmed or quickly bored. The great thing about art is that is the one workspace where you are allowed to be obsessed with anything. This means there are little to no limitations on what you can be inspired by for your ideas. The best ideas are often right next to you.

In step one of the creative process, you need to turn on that switch inside you that allows you to look at the world around you beyond its surface level. Start practicing this way of engaging with the world around you. Be creatively critical about the conversations you have, the articles/books you read, the movies you watch, links you click on and visuals you encounter. Teach yourself not to take anything at face-value, especially in a world where almost nothing is as it seems.

Step 1 is to engage in a series of actions to come up with ideas

Participate actively in filling your world with visual mediums. Watch movies, follow art-based Instagram profiles and start collecting imagery that fits your sensibilities and interests, whether that is the world of Soccer, Interior Decorating or Animals etc. Build an image bank of your world and what influences it. Also make an effort to visit art galleries and art fairs.

Also engage with reading material and perhaps also expand your interactions by searching for Podcasts that fit with your interests. The more you surround yourself with the things that interest, excite or even concern you the more there will be for you to feed off of for ideas.

Examples may include where students worked with personal struggles (such as depression) and then taken it to the next level by allowing themselves to discover the visual world that forms part of the psychology of depression, such as all the medications that mediates it. Others have opted to investigate a particular cultural aspect in their life, such as being of a certain age where all their friends are getting married and what the cultural and social implications of that could be – and in turn immersing themselves in the world of 'white weddings'. Another student opted to delve deeper into the difficulties of having a newborn baby and ended up developing a video game based on her personal experiences. Students even respond to changes in their life, such as moving in with a partner and what the cultural and social implications are on their own life.

This way of looking and engaging with the world continues well after studies and can be seen in the works of the following international artists.

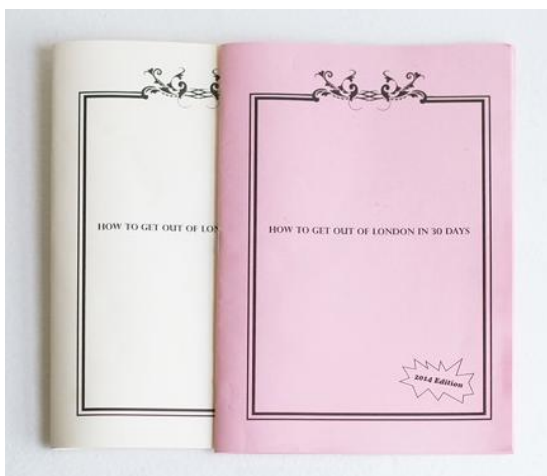
Example 1 Sabina Tupan



Romanian artist Sabina Tupan for instance used a personal experience while using the dating app 'Tinder' where her date stood her up, as inspiration for one of her artworks. Even though the work was inspired by a personal and somewhat stereotypical event, she manages to draw out the absurd and strange through the way that she eventually produced the work.

Fig. 1. Sabina Tupan, 'Waiting for you caused me a rash' (2016). Image courtesy of the artist.

Example 2 Ting Ting Cheng



Taiwanese artist Ting Ting Cheng used her experience as a foreigner based in London, dealing with VISA related issues as the inspiration for her critical work entitled 'How to get out of London in 30 days' where she designed a user-manual (reminiscent of a guide to get a Visa) for ways to exit London. She calls it a reverse travel guide. This particular artwork also spoke directly to Britain's decision at the time to exit the EU – Brexit.

Fig. 2. Ting Ting Cheng, 'How to get out of London in 30 days' (2016). Image courtesy the artist.

For more information on the artwork visit:

<http://www.chengtingting.com/howtogetoutoflondonin30days.html>



Fig. 3. The artist, Ting Ting Cheng, seen here handing out her reverse travel guides to Londoners, taking the work into the public space. Image courtesy of the artist.

Example 3 Leonor Serrano Rivas

Spanish artist Leonor Serrano Rivas often uses her background as an architect to influence her work, where the movements of the body mimic architectural forms.



Fig. 4. Leonor Serrano Rivas, 'Limbs Describe Curves' (2015). Image courtesy of the artist.

The work was also influenced by an encounter that she had with a book that detailed theatrical mimetic techniques in Renaissance Theatre. Through her research and engagement with the things she was reading, she was able to situate her artworks in relation to her own personal sensibilities as an architect.

To conclude, the point is that you need to start evaluating your own particular context and react to it. Your reactions to particular situations, encounters and obsessions will open the first door towards ideas for your artworks and ideas will be easier to spark.

Conversations (note down interesting quotes from friends, family, co-workers). Do not underestimate the power of banal activities (the ones you do on a day-to-day basis).

How can you use banal activities?

Look at how the morning routine for instance has been used in various movies, TV-series etc.

FEEDBACK: Many activities can be a source of inspiration for artists.

Tropes can be a great source of inspiration -

<http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MorningRoutine>

Read books – Fiction, Autobiographical, Political, Fantasy etc.

Expand your knowledge of contemporary philosophies.

Watch Movies (Cinema Nouveau) – Subscribe to various blog's about movies :

www.tasteofcinema.com

Watch TV-Series, but do so critically.

Play Games – Online, video, board-games, playgrounds, theme parks.

Follow artists and curators on Social Media.

Open an Instagram and Vimeo account so that you can be up to date with the latest visuals that are being circulated across the globe, but also locally. Make sure to follow both local and International artists.

Visit the Library! UNISA Library is one of the biggest on the continent and has a large amount of books on art. If your research leads you to one that the library doesn't have, put in a request to your lecturers so that they can ask the library to get it. Visit Art Galleries!

Take inspiration from your Art History courses.

Listen to Podcasts – make your drive to and back from work more interesting! There are podcasts about anything you can think of. Make sure to have a variety of choices, but include all the topics you are interested in. From politics, to history and comedy, or even fiction-based podcasts.

Look at your old workbooks. Often times a good idea was abandoned and you might feel ready now to explore it further.

Most of all, experiment with different artistic mediums. Watch Youtube tutorials and teach yourself new interesting ways of working. Often times, the medium itself carries the message. (Read Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage*)

It is also important to recognize the impact that the entertainment industry has had on the ways artists are engaging with their practices. Yet we need to also consider the impact that 'high art' has had on entertainment, for instance look at the way musicians such as Lady Gaga and Kanye West have worked with artists, but also 'stolen' some of their ideas. Do research on how you as an artist can position yourself within the world of visual cultures. Visit US artist David Robbins's website www.high-entertainment.com for further explanations and predictions of the contemporary visual world.

Step 2: Brainstorming

Step 1 should be repeated through-out the artistic experience as much as possible. The world around you constantly shifts and as an artist it is important to keep your eyes and ears open. For step 2 you will want to take an idea that has been sparked through your engagement with the world. Once you have a broad idea of the context and content you want to work with on a visual and/or auditory level, you will need to narrow the broader topic down. This can be achieved in a number of ways, each of which will inform the other. You may use a Mind-map, a Mood Board, or experimentation (like with different mediums). A large part of this step will of course happen in your workbook, where ideas are fleshed out.

Activity MIND-MAP your ideas

MIND-MAP your ideas in order to activate intuitive visual and cognitive impulses. Mind-Maps are often the best way to arrange ideas and see links between words and visuals and they have the ability to reveal your intuitions very quickly.

Begin by making a mind-map out of words that fit within your particular topic of interest, whether it be as broad as Soccer or Depression both of which have a whole list of words that speak to its context, concepts and visuals. Make various maps, until you have managed to narrow them down.

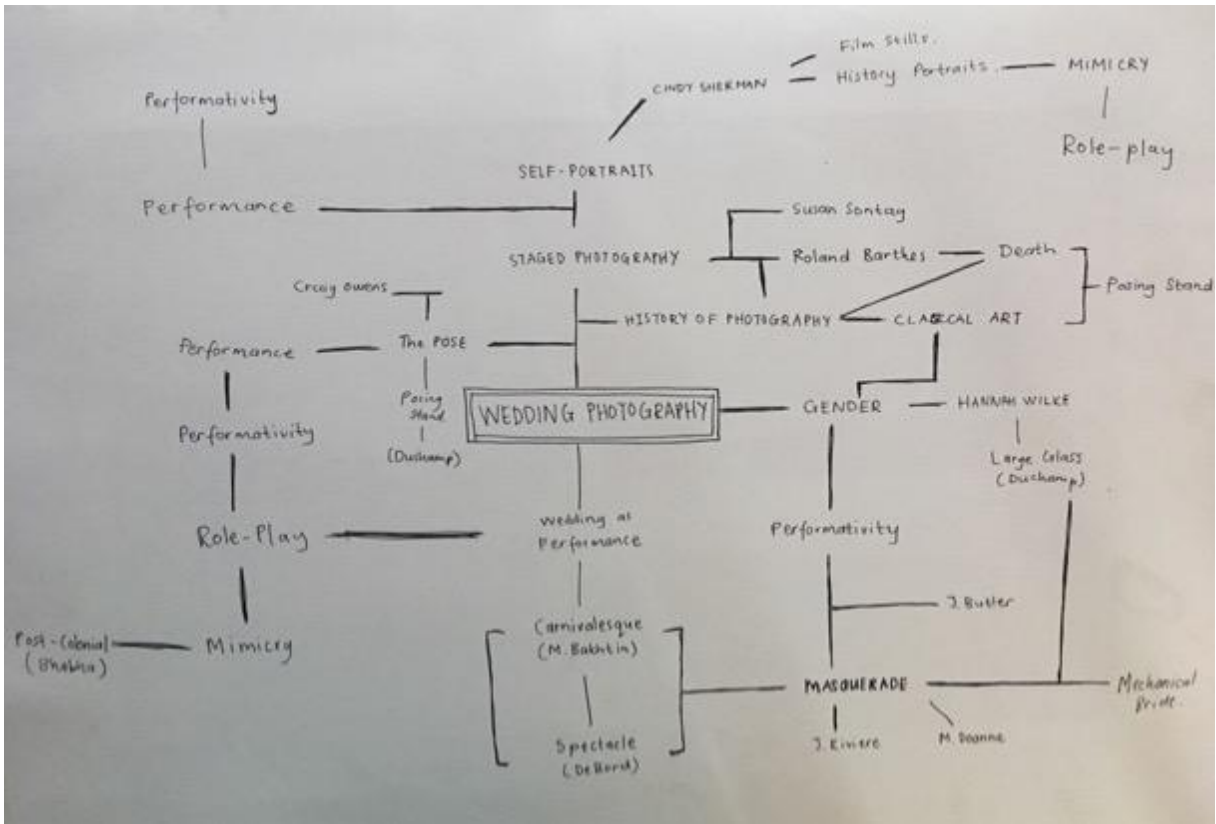


Fig. 5. Mind-map in Nelmarie du Preez's workbook for her body of work, 'Shooting the Bride' (2012). Image courtesy of the artist.

Often times we think of mind-maps as a combination of words that link together, but there is a lot of potential in creating a mind-map simply out of images. Take the text-based maps one step further and replace the words with visuals that speak to each word. They can be based on your own drawings or found-images or even videos that speak to those particular words. Both of these kinds of mind-maps will allow you to narrow the focus of your ideas in a more intuitive and sometimes strange way. Try especially to also make a map that link words and images from the list you have collected that at first glance might appear strange in their relationship, but could offer up new ways of understanding the particular field of interest. Remember that making art often involves a technique of making the ordinary strange. This is called 'Defamiliarisation' a term coined by Russian author Viktor Schlovsky in his essay "Art as Technique" (1917).

MOOD BOARDS: Also consider creating mood-boards, which is an arrangement of images, materials, pieces of text, etc., intended to evoke or project a particular style or concept.

EXAMPLE Abri de Swardt

South African artist Abri de Swardt often creates mood boards straight on his computer screen and then takes screenshots of those to function as mood boards.

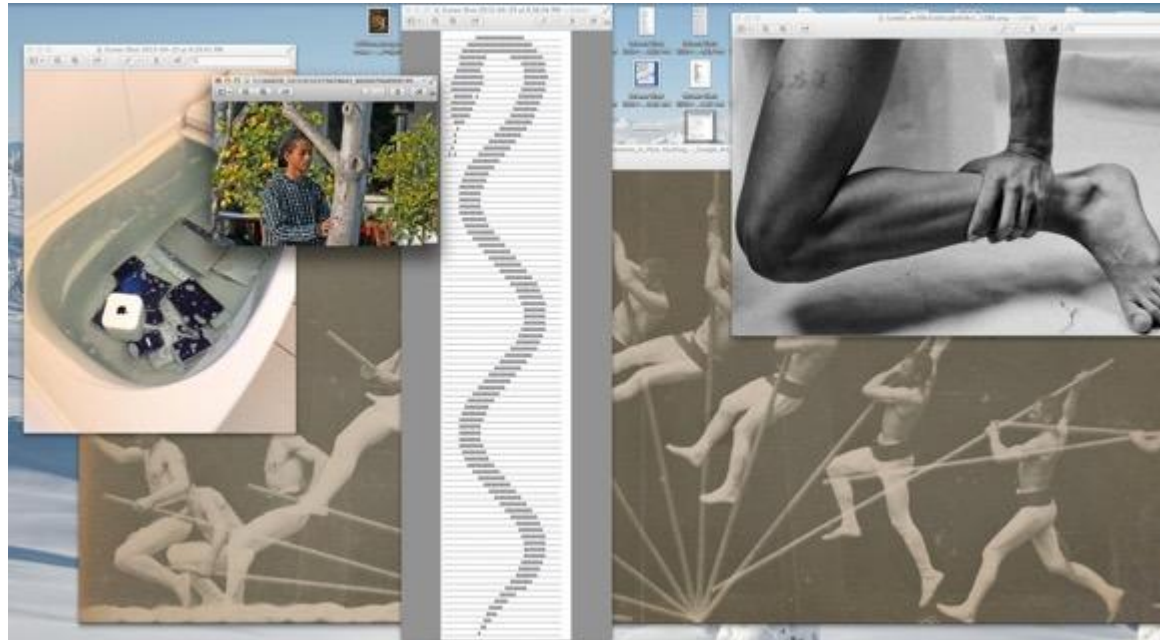


Fig. 6. Desktop Mood Boards by South African artist Abri de Swardt. Image courtesy of the artist.



Fig. 7. Desktop Mood Boards by South African artist Abri de Swardt. Image courtesy of the artist.

The process is where Abri also creates mood boards or visual mind-maps on the walls of his studio.



Fig. 8. Photograph of Abri de Swardt's studio wall. Image courtesy of the artist.

EXPERIMENT: Brainstorming within a creative process also involves experimenting with different mediums. Whether it is simply playing around with the textures that a paint-brush can make or learning how to code a light to turn off and on, you will experience moments of inspiration with the physical engagement with the medium of your choice. The trials and errors you will encounter will more often than not tell you exactly where the artwork wants to go towards. Do not overlook what you might feel are errors as these often contain 'happy mistakes' that lead to new and interesting ways of working.

Remember to bring all your experiments, whether they are successful to you or not, to the UNISA workshops. Your lecturers and fellow students will be able to see past the flaws and assist you to step outside of your comfort-zone.

What did other Artists do?

Do extensive research on what other artists have been doing, especially in the particular medium you are interested in as well as the larger topic of interest. Learn to 'steal' ideas from other artists that allow you to transform and create your own unique works of art.

FEEDBACK: You will find your ideas spark when you read up about other artists and understand what processes they used.

Example Nelmarie du Preez sparked by Daito Manabe

South African artist Nelmarie du Preez was for instance experimenting with Arduino and found a video on Youtube of artist Daito Manabe shocking his and his friends faces to create a kind of choreography. View video here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=pLAma-lrJRM, or, search for Daito Manabe, with Electric stimulus to face.

Nelmarie then ended up translating this idea and technique into a performance that was a re-interpretation of performance artists Marina Abramovic and Ulay's work, however through going through the different steps and cycle's in the creative process she was able to create unique artworks, even though they were inspired by others.



Fig. 9. Nelmarie du Preez, 'to hit' (2013). Video-still. Image courtesy of the artist.

Example Diego Delas sparked by Tarot cards and mythologies

Another Spanish artist, Diego Delas takes a lot of inspiration from traditional Tarot cards and mythologies. These inspirations directly influence his conceptual groundings, which often involves a deep engagement with various notions of memory and walking, while at the same time taking aesthetic cues from the designs found on Tarot cards. Diego also uses walking sticks to hang his paintings in unexpected ways, immediately evoking the idea of a journey.



Fig. 10. Diego Delas, 'Black moves knight/draws a line/makes the trick' (I, II), 2015. Installation.

(I) Gouache, Ink, acrylics and pen on paper, wooden rulers and wood, walking sticks. Image courtesy of the artist.

Step 3: Culling

The combination of mind-mapping and experimentation should lead to a culling in your process. Culling, referring here to the activity of straining something, or reducing it in size and content. In Step 3 your experiments and thinking should be narrowed down and focused, which will allow you

the time and space to do in-depth research on both your topic and medium and how these inform each other.

Distil your ideas

Identify the three most important pillars of your research so far and mentally discard the rest. These pillars should be able to carry the weight of a central concept.

In order to initiate the culling process, you will need to find the specific research areas emanating from your workbook. In order to do this, you will need to take a step back and critically assess what you have been doing and what your experiments are saying.

What did you learn through self-reflecting on your processes?

Consider writing a short self-reflection in report form to unpack the processes you have been working through.

FEEDBACK: Such self-reflection is a difficult thing to do at times for some people, especially as skills need to be developed initially. Here are some ideas to help you to develop this skill ---
Speak to others about your findings and explore the options.
Use the feedback of experienced experts like lecturers that are honestly trying to develop your abilities and strengths. More often than not, others are able to see the interesting qualities in your work that you are blind to. Do not overestimate your own capabilities – listen to what others have to say about your work.

Step 4: Focusing Research into Practice

So far, you have been tinkering in the medium you are interested in and "sketching" with it to varying degrees. With step 4 it is time to COMBINE collected material, research results and new images into experimental works. This, combined with step 5, is by far the most important step in the creative process – the actual production of artworks. Explore related media and materials as a way to communicate new ideas and concepts that underlie your context.

Explore physical ways to succinctly express the ideas you have been working on so far.

Build/paint/develop works that reflect your central pillars. Ideally, these experiments should cleverly convey these pillars through visual metaphor, but they can also simply be literal interpretations of the pillars – after all, these are experiments.

Repeat steps 2 and 3, but do these with more confidence and focus. Allow a certain amount of playfulness through-out each process. Take considered decisions about why a particular medium will be appropriate to speak for your topics. Continue to make strange yet clear connections between ideas and materials.

Example Workbooks for Nelmarie du Preez's body of work



Fig. 11. Workbooks for Nelmarie du Preez's body of work, 'Loops of Relation' (2013). Image courtesy of the artist.

Example Simphiwe Ndzube

South African artist Simphiwe Ndzube explores a multitude of themes through his works and places certain topics against each other to create a rich landscape for his works to communicate in. Some of the themes he has explored includes violence, black subjugation, disability, migrations, exploitation, beauty, consumption and history.



Fig. 12. Simphiwe Ndzube, 'Looking up to the sky, searching beneath the ground', 2015.

This multitude is also reflected in the way that the concepts filter into the materials he decides to work with such as bandages, sjambok, found waste bins, duct tape, latex gloves, synthetic afro hair, found clothes and so forth. Simphiwe works as painter, sculptor and performer and is constantly testing the boundaries of these disciplines. His work is a great example of an artist combining and exploring various ways of communicating visually. Simphiwe also recognizes the playfulness in his work which is often juxtaposed against the seriousness of his topics. He says:

"One of the things I am learning the more I make art is that even though I speak about really hectic issues at times, it's important to keep a certain level of uncertainty and play. I have also very often enjoyed the contradictions between hardships and jubilations that emerge as a result of happy mistakes. Double meanings if you wish." (10and5.com, 2016).



Fig. 13. Simphiwe Ndzube, 'Bharbharosi' (2017). Installation at Nicodim Gallery, Los Angeles, US. Image courtesy the artist and gallery.

Example Lebohang Kganye

South African artist Lebohang Kganye takes personal histories and re-imagines them through photography, performance and animation. She delves into the photographic archives of her family and in particular photos of her late mother. She investigates how these images take on different meanings in different settings and finds ways of exploring the histories that they represent can both be maintained and manipulated. She works with the found images, but transforms them, by turning them into silhouettes and also inserting her own body into the narratives. Lebohang's work has developed from performance based still-photographs to elaborate yet stylistically simple animations. She continuously pushes herself to explore the different forms that the medium of photography can take on and be transformed by. Her explorations show a deep engagement not just with the subject material but also with how she can manipulate the photographs to have new meanings and tell new stories.



Fig. 14. Lebohang Kganye, 'Pied Piper' (2015).



Fig. 15. Lebohang Kganye, 'Ke Sale Teng' (2016). Video-still.

Step 5: Meaning-Making

The act of meaning-making is fundamental for any artistic practice.

“The meaning of the work is seen as constructed by the interaction of the viewer with the work. Meaning therefore depends in part on the particular viewer and/or the culture of the viewer. Hence it is not universal, the same for every viewer”. (Parsons 2002, p.30)

It is important to understand both the relationship between the viewer and the artwork. The audience will always stand in front of your work with their own set of experiences, which will both allow and guide the way that they interpret your artwork.

“An object of any kind takes on meaning for an individual apprehending that object, as soon as that individual places the object in relation to areas of his lived experience –that is, in relation to a collection of other objects that belong to his or her experience of the world.” (Nattiez 1990, p.9)

This can also be said for the use of language. Though words come with definitions, they almost always come with their own set of personal baggage that every person relates to differently.

Example Sophie Hoyle

British-Lebanese artist Sophie Hoyle, takes cues from this by applying text to her work about refugees from Lebanon. Her work explicitly replaces images and objects with text or abstractions of her own body, thereby re-enforcing the impact that visuals about war and trauma have on our consciousness and in-turn desensitizing many of us of the pain that they represent while the people who live those images are perhaps never desensitized.



Fig. 16. Sophie Hoyle, Soft to Shrapnel (2016). Video-stills. Images courtesy the artist.

Anticipate the viewer experiences. Begin to anticipate what the potentially different experiences of the viewer could add to your artwork and how you can draw those experiences out, both from yourself and your audience.

REACH for the final concept through critical self-assessment and elimination of ideas that are less successful. Once you have broken down what your core ideas/pillars are you would have started to make artworks in response to that. By now you should have experimented a lot and a picture will have begun to form in your mind of those experiments that are successful and those that are not. Your lecturers will also help you along in this regard at the first and second assessments. This will bring you to a conception of how your audience will make sense of your artwork. It is critical to remember that your audience does not share your mind and will not understand multiple disparate ideas presented in wildly different ways. Consequently, it is vital to find a unified aesthetic amongst your works that is both easy to recognise and metaphorically interesting.

Group your experiments and final works.

Begin to place your successful experiments and the final works that have stemmed from them into groups by visual similarity. Consider how an outsider might interpret these groups if they encountered one of them "cold," in other words without any knowledge of your concept or intention.

Doing this exercise should help you to once again to recognise which areas of your body of work are successfully communicating your concept and which seem confusing or unrelated. Whatever the case may be, you will have identified certain areas in your physical artworks or experiments that can be pushed further and linked better to your concept. You might also have realized that the artworks you have made talk more about something else than what your initial idea was.

Now try to consolidate all your ideas, experiments and outcomes into one singular defined topic and begin to unpack what the main areas are that you have to work on further.

Step 6: Installation

ENABLE the collected material to determine final form, content and presentation.

Now that you have settled on the medium, topic and form that your artworks will take, you will need to address the presentation thereof. How will the work be shown to the public? For your final exam you will present your work in a gallery-space (however you can request to do your presentation at another location IF your work is site-specific).

You will need to address the fact that the space where you exhibit your work is a public space where people walk through and encounter your work. It will be your job to visually guide them through the space, through the placement of your artworks. Research how artists have used sight-lines to determine how a viewer encounters the work.

Also do research on the architecture of the gallery and where your work will be placed. Draw maps of the gallery space and start arranging your artworks. Even consider making a 3D model, whether it is a physical maquette (small to-scale model) or a 3D animation.

Think about how the artworks themselves can be enhanced by simply deciding to project the video on a surface that is not just the gallery wall. If you have paintings, what would it mean if you stacked them against the wall or balanced them like sculptures in the space instead of simply nailing them to the wall. Begin to understand the relationship that the body of the viewer will have with your artwork in the gallery space and how you can play with that relationship. Perhaps you want to have them fully immersed in an environment reminiscent of being under the ocean, with Jelly-fish like sculptures that the audience has to walk into and on-top of, which might speak to the notion of how humans destroy sea-life. Thus the meaning of your work can be enhanced through the way you decide to install it and how you physically manipulate the viewer to engage with the artworks.

Be in control of each stage of the installation. If the gallery staff are assisting you with the hanging of the paintings, projectors etc., make sure that you are present so that you can make final decisions and be responsible for the way that your work is displayed. Make sure that you have the right tools to achieve the installation. You do not want to waste time driving around to find masking-tape, nails etc. Arrive at the gallery with everything you might possibly need.

Also be prepared for the fact that once you physically see your works in the gallery your initial ideas might need to be tweaked and shifted. Enter the gallery with a plan, but an open-mind. Through-out the several steps that you have taken to get to the final stage you will have learned how to react to the way in which the medium you have selected acts in different settings. You might have thought that you wanted to hide all the cables in your installation, but find that in the end the cables add another sculptural layer with new meaning, which enhances the overall theme and aesthetic of your work. Once your artworks enter the gallery space they will take on a particular energy and it will be your job to determine what the best placement will be for them to speak clearly.

Before you start hanging anything place them first in the spots where you imagine that they would work. Ask your lecturers and fellow students for advice, but continue to be confident in your decisions. Once you have established where it needs to be placed you can start installing, but keep a clear head so that you can make changes as the installation progresses.

Try to keep the space neat and tidy while you work. Once everything is in place you will have the opportunity to do final touches and have your space ready for the exam and public opening.

In conclusion

The creative process is complex, but it is not irreducible. It is important to immerse oneself in one's ideas and it is equally important to step back and really distil those ideas into workable concepts. However what is absolutely paramount is the act of simply making art. It is possible to navigate the creative process by remembering that is a cycle that repeats. It is important to remember that there are steps to follow when in doubt. With the exception of step 6, one could and in fact should repeat these steps multiple times.

When lecturers see you for your first assessment they will be more focused on how you have executed steps 1 to 3 and will expect to see some experimentation already (the beginnings of step 4). At the second workshop (the second assessment) lecturers will expect you to have followed steps 1 to 5 several times already. Your final examination will evaluate your body of work as it has progressed throughout the year (all six steps).

The next unit will go into greater detail about concept.

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Further Reading

Read more.

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Further Viewing

View more videos.

The Medium is the Message:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ko6J9v1C9zE>

Edmund Burke and the Sublime: <https://youtu.be/t0fHjIPpR-Q>

The Five Filters of the Mass Media: <https://youtu.be/34LGPIXvU5M>

Roland Barthes, Mythologies: <https://youtu.be/FeF6O6E9RQ8>