

Paper presented at 8<sup>th</sup> Arts in Society conf., Budapest, June 2013.

Published in *International Journal of Arts Education* Vol.8 2014 ISSN 2326-9944

## **Drivers of Creativity: How Theory can Inform Contemporary Practice in the Art School Curriculum and Beyond**

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### **Abstract**

This paper discusses an innovative strategy for the integration of theory modules, termed *Drivers of Creativity*, with the studio practices undertaken in the MA portfolio of courses in Fine Art, Photography, Visual Communication and Textiles at the Dynevor Centre for Arts, Design and Media, Swansea Metropolitan University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Wales, UK.

It argues that at the heart of the creative process, there lie tensions which drive much – if not all – creative activity in those disciplines. Such tensions emanate from dialectical oppositions which impinge upon all producers of artworks of all kinds, firstly between notions of individual identity and the *mores* of the social group; and secondly the dialectical opposition between the natural environment and human cultural constructions and interventions.

These two dialectical oppositions inform the structure and content of the two theory modules undertaken by all first year students on the MA Programmes. The modules are described in terms of their aims, objectives and learning outcomes, and an indication of the modules' content and teaching strategies is given.

The paper is illustrated with a range of case studies, illustrating both the author's and students' practice motivated by the *Drivers of Creativity* modules. Evaluation of the quality of the project work is informed by a general criterion: the degree of balance evident between two factors, introduced and explained as *conceptual intrigue* and *perceptual intrigue*.

### **Introduction: Tension, Relief, Pleasure, Intrigue**

In their seminal work *Psychology of the Arts*, Hans and Shulamith Kreidler (1972:6) identify four major theories "...which have served as central foci for psychological studies of the spectator's experience of art. These are: psychoanalysis, the Gestalt theory, behaviourism and information theory." This article is not the place to elaborate on these four, however it is worth identifying factors common to all four:

1 Experiences of art explained in terms of concepts which have a psychological validity.

2 A reliance upon a homeostatic model of behaviour.

3 An assumption that tension and the relief of such tension are integral to all experiences of art.

To paraphrase the Kreitlers (1972:13), the homeostatic model of motivation assumes that all organisms strive for optimal conditions for their existence and survival. The optimal condition is defined as an equilibrium between internal and external processes as well as among the internal processes themselves. Any imbalance disturbing equilibrium triggers tensions in the organism, tensions which are relieved through actions designed to restore balance. Interestingly, such restoration of equilibrium need not necessarily lead to the prior state of balance, but the establishment of new states of equilibrium rather akin to the way that resolution between thesis and antithesis can result in a new state of synthesis. Even though the Kreitlers's argument is applied to *spectators* of art, it would appear equally relevant that the need to resolve tensions can be manifested in the practice of *makers* of artworks. The article goes on to elaborate how:

The Kreitlers (1972:14) enumerate several examples of balance-disturbing factors, such as "...facing an unresolved problem...the perception of an unbalanced figure...being prevented from concluding an interrupted task..."

This article argues that such examples are singular examples of the two fundamental dialectical oppositions within which the potential for disturbing psychological equilibrium exist:

1 The dialectical opposition between our need for individual identity and our need for acceptance within the social group.

2 The dialectical opposition between the natural environment and our culturally-motivated compulsion to make representations of, and interventions within that natural environment.

Within the Master's degree programme, these two oppositions are identified as potential sources of tension leading to a general imbalance of psychological equilibrium, and it is argued that the stimulus to resolve the subsequent tensions is the driver of human creativity.

The homeostatic model adumbrated above, essentially based upon a rise in tension followed by a reduction in tension, is, in both psychological and physiological terms, concomitant with the experience of pleasure (Kreitler and Kreitler 1972:13). Specifically in the context of the visual arts, such pleasure can be defined in terms of the degree of intrigue experienced by the viewer encountering the artwork, an intrigue with two components, *perceptual intrigue*, and *conceptual intrigue*, derived from an insight of Hegel, who identified a space for art which still seems tenable: halfway between *sensual experience* and *intellectual understanding*. For Hegel, (in Graham 1997:174), the distinguishing feature of art is the "sensual presentation of the idea". I'd like to extrapolate from Hegel's position, and develop this pair of criteria with which to assess the validity of artwork, regardless of medium, regardless of context:

Firstly, the notion of *perceptual intrigue*: the degree to which the manipulation of the material qualities of the work and its environmental context might stimulate perceptual experiences which cause the gaze to linger, and perceptual complacencies to be challenged; and secondly, the notion of *conceptual intrigue*: the degree to which a work

affords viewers fresh intellectual insights on the theme or concept to which the work alludes. These two linked ideas become the criteria by which to evaluate artwork in the complex context of an MA course.

### **Drivers of Creativity**

The rationale of the two theory modules as stated in the course document validated in 2011 explains:

The relationship between theory and practice permeates the teaching strategies of the whole MA portfolio. (The portfolio consists of four pathways: Fine Art; Photography; Visual Communication and Textiles.) In particular, the two dialectical relationships which define us as human, and which generate the tensions that we believe drive all human creativity, form the underlying structure of the whole course – the practical modules and the taught theory modules. Those two dialectical relationships are:

*The opposition between the need for forming an individual identity and the need to conform to the conventions of the social group.*

*The opposition between the need to engage with and manage interventions within our ecological relationship with Nature, and our drive to develop what might be termed 'Culture' – ways of sharing and otherwise communicating our experiences of that ecological relationship.*

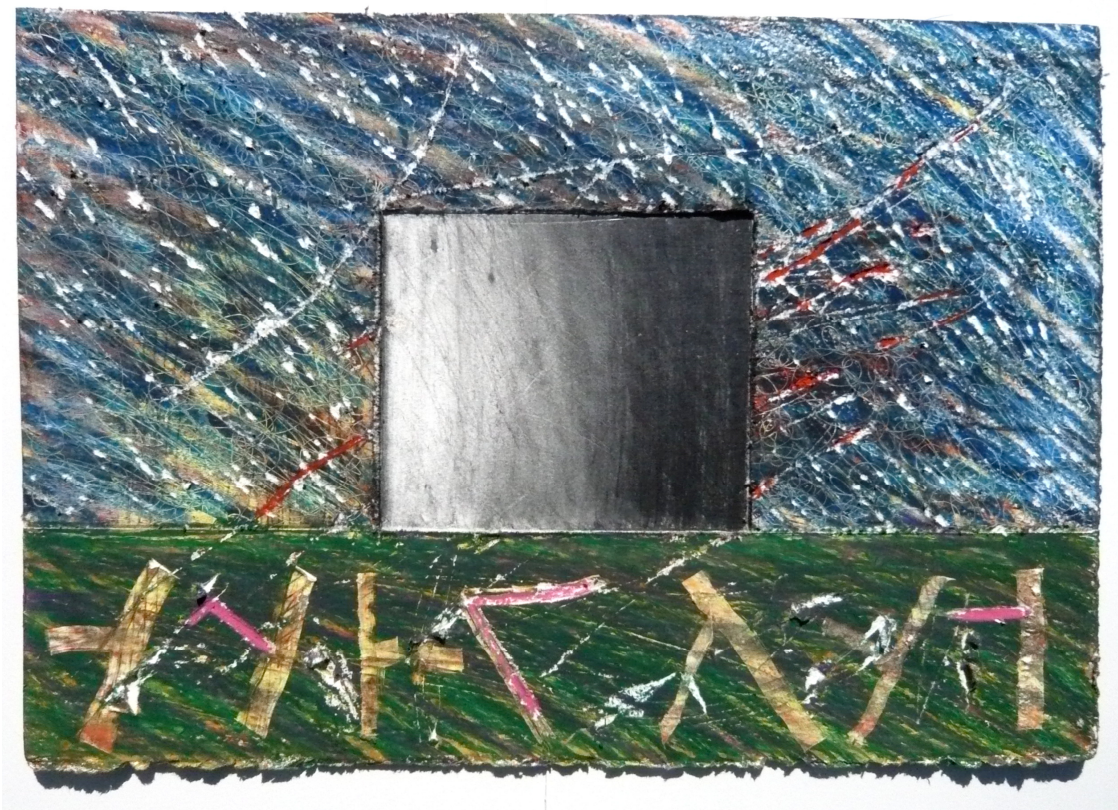
As well as addressing these two fundamental sources of creativity, the two 'Drivers' modules address issues pertinent to the effective channelling of the creative tensions: issues such as methods for gathering and collating necessary information and other data, and issues to do with the materiality of our practices, and the relationship between such materiality and philosophical aesthetics.

### **Case Study 1**

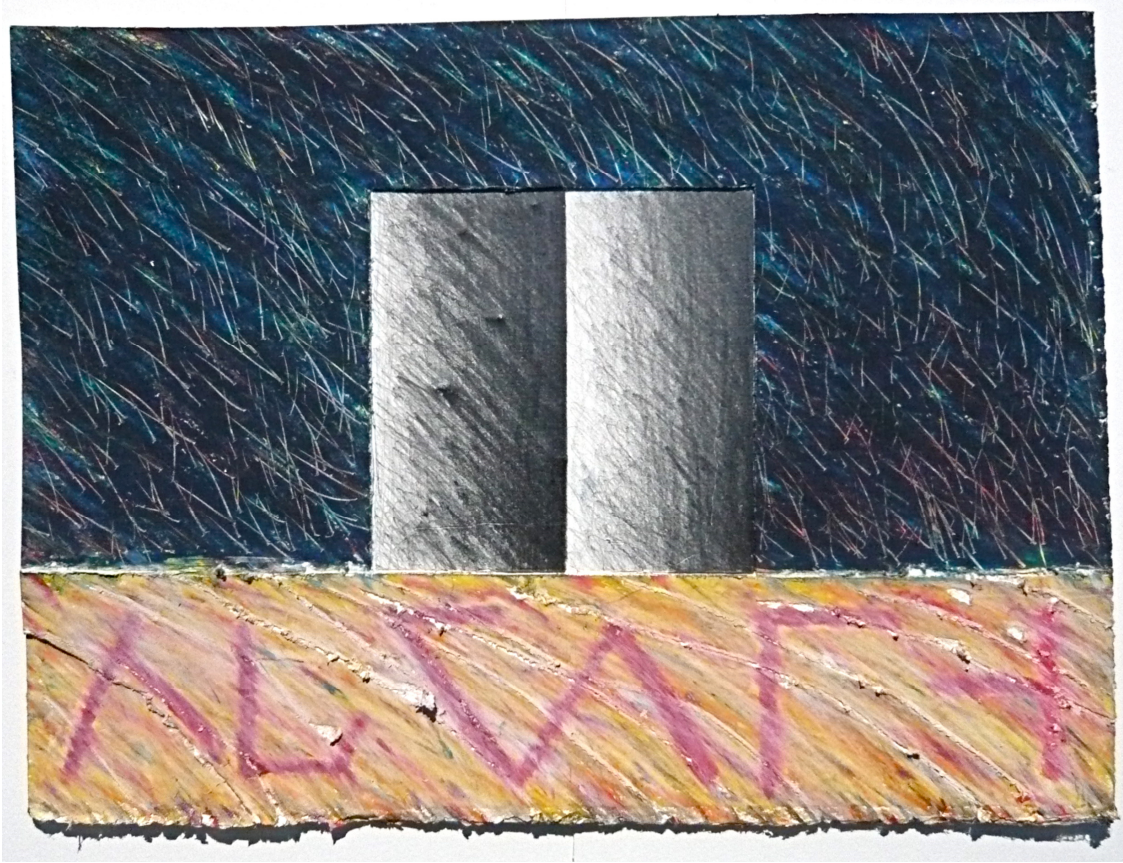
As illustration, Case Study 1 addresses the author's practice, driven by the opposition between the unpredictability of natural processes, and our need to develop cultural codes through which such chaos may be ordered. Language itself is one such cultural code, the written forms of which are made up of arbitrary signs (alphabets) and structured by

cultural conventions (rules of grammar and syntax). Where did the capacity for writing come from? Our earlier capacity for depiction: the facility for inscribing marks resembling the appearance of the things we notice, and which hold importance in our lives, on surfaces capable of retaining such markings for long periods of time, thus becoming a repository of shareable information. Of course, once the notion of depiction is grasped, the idea that meaning might be given to a *non*-depictive sign – a symbol – is viable.

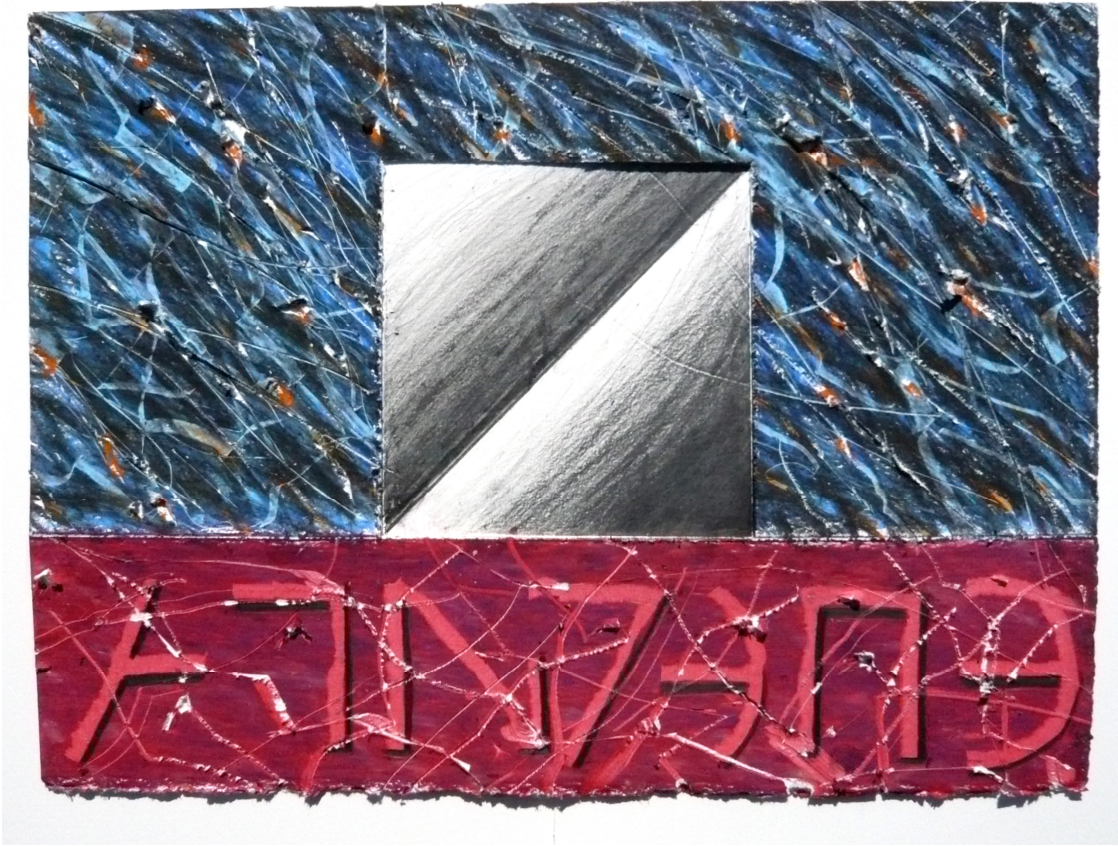
Figures 1, 2 and 3 may be read as metaphors for the evolution of written codes made up of arbitrary symbols: in the background, chaos. In the middle-ground, the square, representing the human capacity for ordering, structuring, and through this capacity emerge written symbols in the foreground:



**Figure 1** Howard Riley 2012 *Depiction Precedes Writing 1*. Oil pastel, graphite on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper. 29x38cms



**Figure 2** Howard Riley 2012 *Depiction Precedes Writing 2*. Oil pastel, graphite on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper. 29x38cms



**Figure 3** Howard Riley 2012 *Depiction Precedes Writing 3*. Oil pastel, graphite on Saunders Waterford 300gsm paper. 29x38cms

## Case Study 2

The work of MA student Laura Reynolds illustrates how a material practice can evolve through the attempt to resolve the tensions within the field of gender representation: how individual notions of gender identity can be challenging to the accepted *mores* of the social group. Her many-layered garment – a dress never intended to be worn but displayed - includes the delicacy of an underlay made of tissue paper, printed repeatedly with the word *glimpse*, associations of femininity exposed to the male gaze. Overlaying this is a skirt of canvas upon which are secured many bows of fragile paper,



**Figure 4** Laura Reynolds 2013





**Figure 5** Laura Reynolds 2013

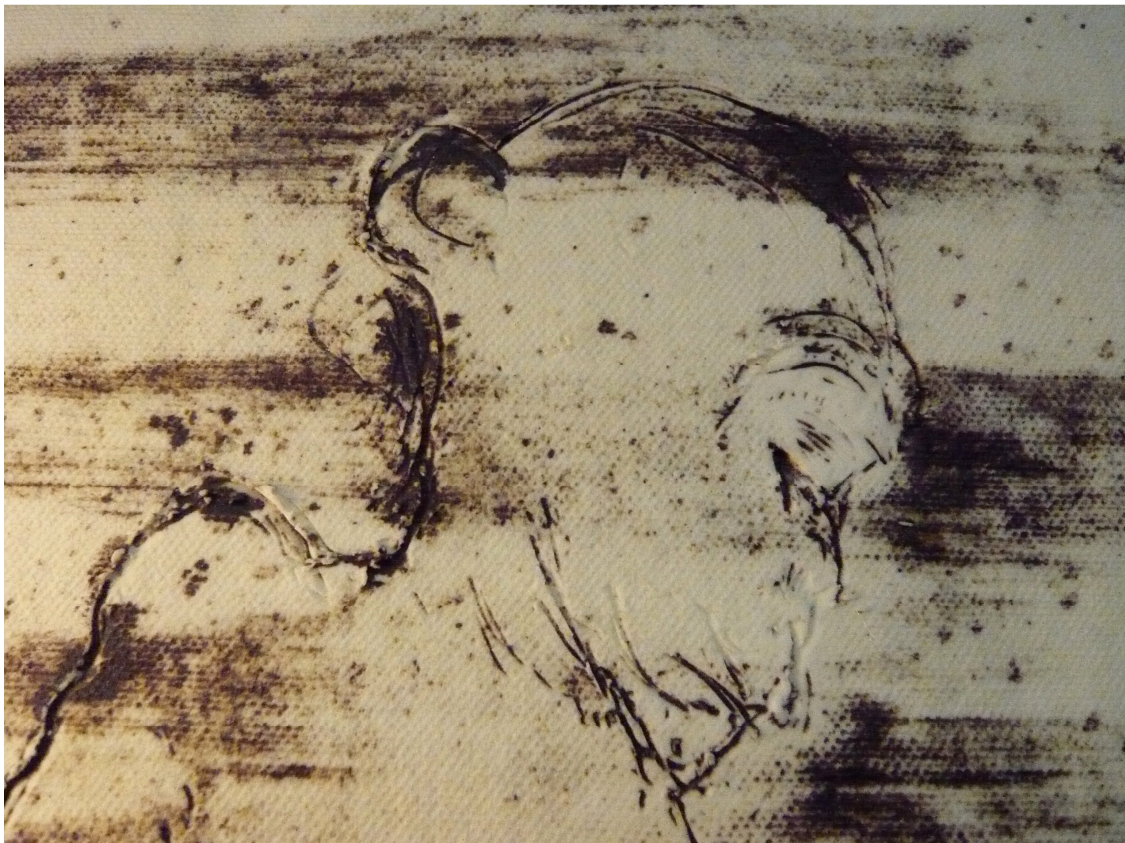
each obscuring from view an image of a male, naked except for an enigmatic, Magritte-like bowler hat and sock-suspenders, and carrying a briefcase, metonymic of the mainly masculine world of city business. The vulnerability of these naked figures clashes with their attributes of male power.

The artist says of her work that "...it has a multi-layered approach, everything feeds into the influence, news, TV, radio, conversation, memories, everyday occurrences, you often start with a very clear idea of what you want to say, but then the aesthetic comes into it, and decisions are made on that basis. Looking at the work retrospectively it's often easier to see what was at work at the time, influencing those decisions. For me, the empty dress

is less a symbol of loss, however prevalent this may be in all our lives, but more as a vessel for dialogue, a container for thoughts and ideas.”

### **Case Study 3**

Christina Rowlands’ practice is ceramic-based, driven by the tensions produced when cultural interventions affect the natural world. Such a natural, earth-bound material seems suitably ironic as the means to express her despair at the way our society legitimises cultural interventions within the sphere of nature, condoning experimentation on live animals in order to improve the lot of our species at the expense of others.



**Figure 6** Christina Rowlands 2013 *Diseased Monkey* (detail) clay tablet 33x26cms



**Figure 7** Christina Rowlands 2013 *Tiger* clay tablet 27x19cms

Figures 6 and 7 illustrate a monkey and a tiger, each engrained in the natural material context of clay, reminiscent of the images made at a time when humans were in a much more symbiotic relationship with their animal neighbours, but here representing both as animals made to suffer from human-induced diseases in the name of medical research. The gashes in the clay, made by scratching and scraping on the soft surface with a hard stylus, carry connotations of an angry urgency as well as physical damage, a statement full of shocking immediacy that such behaviour could be tolerated in a so-called civilised culture. The intentional simplicity and crudity of the marks gouged in the clay are in stark opposition to the still widely-held self-image of our technologically sophisticated culture. These pieces refute such self-deception, and graphically communicate the reality of our attitude towards the natural world as a source of exploitation for our own ends, a perception held even long after Ernst Haeckel introduced in 1866 the notion of *ecology* – the understanding that we cultural sophisticates are an integral part of the planetary household.. *We hurt ourselves when we hurt our fellow inhabitants*, these panels scream.

Paul Woodford installation?

**Conclusion**

Round up with percept/concept intrigue evidence?

## **References**

- GRAHAM, G. 1997 *Philosophy of the Arts*. London: Routledge.  
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