

Sylvia Llecha

Language as a Way to Express Craft Practice

Abstract

This paper is based on work that explores relationships between language and craft practice. Language has its limitations, but these limitations can be articulated or bypassed differently by manipulating certain elements of language construction. Language offers many possibilities of expression and interpretation. However difficult it is to think that meaning is the same for everyone, language is how we communicate primarily. Language needs a shared understanding. It is used to carry and convey any meaning, significance or sense. It also carries deeply engrained cultural and social codes within itself.

The practice of craft through artefacts shows a constant enquiry for questioning, a desire to find new ways of creating, articulating and interpreting materiality. The substance of the artefacts is the reality of the objects in space; the things produced, or thought about, are part of the result but also part of the questioning and of the process of enquiry. They are the start and the end.

Through literary devices the paper refers to the production of artefacts, to creative activity and thoughts. Figures of speech and literary techniques are used as a reference grid to allow us to 'read the practice' mediated through the production of artefacts. These figures of speech and literary devices are: metaphors, similes, alliterations, metonymy and digressions.

The paper uses these techniques as a series of frames: to unlock a way to describe the working process, as well as a way to read it in a conventional sense; to unlock how that process is structured and what it means as a 'maker'. The paper draws the conclusion that through these interpretations, through these figures of speech, the meaning of artefacts, situated, formed and understood through craft practice and alluded to relationships, can then be rediscovered, unearthed, excavated and re-interpreted.

Introduction

The paper explores the relationships between language and craft practice; language is a subtle and wonderfully complex arrangement that offers many possibilities of expression and interpretation. Language also needs a shared understanding and carries deeply engrained cultural and social codes within itself – these elements are the backdrop to my work.

The paper refers to the production of artefacts, creative activity and design thinking. It uses literary devices, figures of speech and literary techniques as a reference point or grid to allow 'a reading of the practice'. This is mediated through the production of artefacts.

The language and literary devices used are all linked as elements in my practice and are based on: parenthesis, metaphors, limitation, digressions, and alliteration. Each element will fulfil a function within the practical work and for the concerns expressed through this paper – the reader will find it embedded within the structure of the text itself. What follows is a list of the word topologies I use to construct works.

Parenthesis: providing a context and shared understanding for the reading.

Metaphors: because some things are more expressive and gain in substance when not directly mentioned. They open access to the realm of personal experience and feeling. They talk to the heart and to imagination, not to the rational.

Limitations: They are what create difference. Without limitations all would eventually end up as being the same. Limitation is inherent to creativity. Also, this is written (spatial limitation, use of language, formats, conventions).

Digressions: They allow for meandering, and exploration, to go back somewhere and bring reflection, as reflection is intimately bound up

with practice. Also they can be used as a way to link previously unrelated factors.

Alliteration: Physical repetition brings experiential knowledge. It is also useful in terms of understanding a similar experience (it allows exploration of nuance).

As well as the functions above, they are also used as a series of frames:

To unlock a way to describe the working process, as well as a way to read it in a conventional sense.

To unlock how that process is structured and what it means as a 'maker'.

To put this into a context it is necessary to say a little about me. My practice is an embodied practice – it is who I am and thus impacts on what I do. What I make also changes me as new experiences add and alter my reality. The meaning of artefacts, situated, formed and understood through craft practice, has always had for me alluded relationships. They can then be rediscovered, unearthed, excavated and re-interpreted.

My personal life has had some bearing on what I make and how I think, so it's important to detail what this has been and is. I was born in France from Catalan parents. My maternal language is Catalan – this was the language I spoke when at home. Being born in France, I spoke French at school. When visiting family in Spain during Franco's regime, I spoke Spanish as Catalan was not allowed and not welcome in the streets. I learnt English when I came to live in England, and British Sign Language when working with deaf people. I do not see language as fixed and immutable. I can compare expressions and sayings from one language to the other.

As a child, I was taught tasks considered as feminine in society (such as sewing, embroidery, crocheting, knitting and cooking), but I was also taught how to use drills and saws from a very young age. My skills and use of tools, domestic or otherwise, were acquired for independence – this was crossing gender boundaries in a way that was unusual at the time.

My father was a shoemaker cobbler and my mother was a seamstress. They both used patterns, which needed assembling, to make and transform 2D planes into 3D forms, such as shoes and garments. They both were practical people and they gave me a

practical education.

As a maker I have acquired an intimacy with certain processes and materials. I have developed a taste for a particular way of doing things. The things made, the thoughts produced, are part of the result and become in turn part of the process of enquiry; they are the start and the end.

In the early 1980s, Mezirow, Freire and others emphasised that at the centre of all learning lies the way we process experience, in particular our critical reflection of experience. For them, learning is 'a cycle that begins with experience, continues with reflection and later leads to action, which itself becomes a concrete experience for reflection' (Rogers 1960).

Artefacts are a concrete experience of reflection. They represent the result of a process of making and thinking. They also are the basis for future reflection as the outcome of the first object is going to have implications for how the next object is going to be negotiated. Making is a journey inwards as well as outwards. As a human being I also have acquired a social and historical context, a repertoire of ways of doing, ways of making, ways of being. This paper will endeavour to reveal and articulate my particular working process.

Was it the word?

Language has its limitations, but these limitations can be articulated or by-passed by manipulating certain elements of language. Language can create many worlds: it can be factual, it can be related to the world of fiction, to the world of dreams, to hopes and futures. Hopes and futures start with a projection of oneself; what the words do is to fix the projection in utterances (to utter: from old French: 'to carry to excess, to bring to life'; 'object': a tangible and visible thing: from Latin, *objectus*: 'something thrown before the mind').

Objects by their nature impact on how the space they inhabit is negotiated. They are present; like making, language is performative. Richardson (2000) says that writing 'appears as a method that does not only reflect and store the reality but produces it', and Verbeek (2000) suggests that 'artefacts and their mediation with the world allow us to realise ourselves and contextualise reality'. However difficult it is to think that meaning is the same for everyone, language (a dominant means of communication in our culture) is how we communicate primarily.

In his seminars Lacan looks at the social structures and laws embodied by language, in the symbolic order. To relate to others, each subject must take up a place in the language of the symbolic order. Lacan talks about 'a wall of language' which joins and separates subjects; it joins them in that it enables them to communicate, but it separates them in that communication is never complete (Lacan 1988) – like islands separated but joined by the expanse of the sea.

The map

Through features of speech, imagery, poetry, and manipulation, language gains a way to present non-visible yet existent meaning. I use these elements to create and situate my practical work. I use them as way-finders to direct me to and from different materials, different connections and different glazes, configurations and assemblages. I use the same collections of words to align my thinking to process like a system, although these configure naturally. This next section details the understanding of the words I use and how I use them to find meaning within my practice.

Metaphors: Lakoff (2003) explains that: 'The essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of experience in terms of another.' He continues by saying that metaphors are more than just a literary device. They are a fundamental mechanism of mind. They provide culturally defined interpretations, heightened imagery and routes for poetic licence (definition of poetry: from *poietos*, 'made', verbal adjective of *poiein*, 'to make, create, compose'). Metaphors are transferences. Sometimes the transference is not made within the transformation of the object but with the re-situation of the object in a different context.

Marcel Duchamp's ready-made is an example. He positioned his work outside the normal perception of the artefacts. He used metaphors for questioning, subverting and objecting to the socially-understood signs. He transformed the meaning associated with the object rather than the object itself. At a simple level this happens every time I take a jug, for example, out of display and put it back in my studio amidst the general chaos of the shelves for a few days before being packed away.

Metaphorical absence: In 'Fidget Drawing', Kenneth Goldsmith catalogues every movement made during thirteen hours on 16 June 1997. He only states the physical actions; he uses no adjectives, no adverbs, or any rhetorical device. The absence of

these features makes the human condition, with its weaknesses and strengths, even more present and strongly felt. This is transferred to the finished object by the maker. They are the individual characteristics, the voice of the maker existing in the invisible ways and marks that make the work.

This transference can also be a digestion or an appropriation. Appropriation is a strategy to adapt to an environment. What appropriating does is to allow taking something foreign and making it one's own through transformation.

Metaphorical subversion: Punks were very successful at transferring and subverting. They altered and impacted culture through the use of collage and assemblage. They cut and pasted to redefine their own identity and their own world, subverting traditional signs and symbols such as the English flag, tartan, etc. They crafted, subverting the traditional signs of the ruling order by creating their own. This transference resulted in a cultural hijack, appropriation, and a *detournement*. Within my practice I transfer and appropriate processes from the realm of the domestic to the realm of a making studio, such as sewing, crocheting or cooking.



Figure 1.

Neil Bronsword, the 'Poet of Residue', as he is called by Gallery Bresson, uses pieces found in the remains of the declining ceramic factories in Stoke-on-Trent. In doing so he creates new meaning and transforms pieces by putting them together, an assemblage of discarded and obsolete remains, an unwanted and decrepit part of history once alive with bustle and activity. Some form of poignancy comes through his creations. The absence is nearly felt, like the perfume remaining in a room long after the person wearing it has gone.

The transference and appropriation also happen as a necessity in cultures of scarcity (which links with limitations). The objects created develop a narrative structure in themselves, as demonstrated in Arkhipov (2006). These objects or their parts change, migrate from one use and assemblage to the next. The object is not seen as a whole finished thing but as a set of possibilities put together forming a 'togetherness', able to change and evolve with their usage. The resulting object or thought process is an assemblage, a deconstruction and a reconstruction and 'un bricolage'. According to Lévi-Strauss in *La Pensee sauvage* (1962): 'The bricoleur universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with "whatever is at hand", that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite'.

In my studio practice the usage of the tools and the resources I have change to accommodate my needs. My studio door lock can be a hairpin, a padlock, a spoon, a screwdriver. A hammer can be used to drive nails into wood but it can also be used as a weight, used as a stamp to imprint a shape or texture or as a marker for a reference point. What is available and at hand is a contributing factor of what I do. I was given an unwanted pack of round cards, which led me to make prototypes with cones. The fact that the set of tools or materials are finite brings the limitation.

Limitations: As mentioned earlier, without limitation all would eventually end up being the same. It is a source of creativity. Resourcefulness is necessary when using limitations, imposed or not. The Oulipo (*Ouvroir de litterature potentielle*) was a gathering of writers and mathematicians which sought to create works using constrained writing techniques. They used restrictions as a path to creation. For example, Georges Perec wrote a book without using the letter 'e'.

Practitioners also have to deal with limitations: limitation of resources, of time and of space. The size of my kiln limits the size of the pots I make

(Figure 2). I also have limitations, which are part of my own make-up and culture. I use what I have and try to maximise the use of my tools and resources. This was true of the way I was raised, but also true of the British culture and society in the 1950s of the 'make, do and mend' generation, or as seen before in cultures of scarcity. The limitation brings creativity as it forces people to see things not as fixed in their use and form but capable of transformation, full of potential and possibilities. It is the ways of seeing which are important, not what is looked at.

As a maker I use, adapt and transform skills. The work based on crochet corresponds to a skill learned as a child that I transferred to another material (from cotton to copper wire), and another process and material is added (porcelain and firing).

De Certeau(1984) talks about the usage of artefacts, which he calls 'ways of making, a way of thinking invested in a way of acting', which links with the possibility to acquire knowledge through the ways of making. For De Certeau, these practices are an integral part of the everyday life experiences, and also that the way people represent their world can be found in the usage of these practices. My practices, my ways, form an integral part of my practice and impact on my preoccupations and making.



Figure 2.

During my experimentation with glass I used an assemblage of techniques, some from the realm of domestic activity such as piping, sieving, grinding, mixing, others more technical such as plaster mould making, layering, and an assemblage of materials, recycled glass and copper wire, pigments.

I also, like my parents, use patterns and templates, in this case to make blue jugs (Figure 2). Each one

develops its own identity in the organic process of making. Each one becomes a representation of some possibilities. As well as being a transfer of skill, technique, it is also a part of personal, social history, a narrative, a response, where memory and everyday life reside. It is a place where artefacts emerge, splurge, happen, occur, and grow from the manipulation. Sometimes they are stumbled upon; artefacts are symptomatic of the making and of the thinking activity. This transference of skills, techniques, materials, allows revisiting past events, memories and history. They also provide opportunities for digression.

Digression (to digress; to depart from the main subject in speech or writing; to wander from one's path or main direction, to drift; in French, *derive*). There is a reason for digression, wandering and *detournement* due to the connections, the appropriations, we make to comprehend the world. They are bridge-building equipment to link isolated lands; digressions are teleporting devices that transport us beyond matter from one place to another. Sometimes the digressions are foreign and not understood. The bridge is only experienced and walked on by ourselves and exists on the value of our personal experience. For me, digression allows me to revisit things, events, artefacts, and review them in a different light. To make connections where there were none. They provide a jump, a leap.

In my practice, I digress often – ‘*Je passe du coq a l'ane*’ (to jump from the cockerel to the donkey). One could think that my thoughts and my practice are non-sequitur and unlinked. This is perhaps due to the non-linear nature of the thought process, or to what Deleuze and Guattari (1972) refer when they identify ‘*bricolage*’ as the characteristic mode of production of the schizophrenic producer. Although the thoughts and artefacts might seem non-sequitur, they are connected in the invisible similarities but also in the striking differences. Furthermore, I am the connector.



Figure 3

Even if digression and *detournement* diverge, they have a common thread. They both, in their own way, provide long stitches rather than a short cut.

In my practice, the digression can also be a regression to the specific time and place. A revisitation. Geometric shapes are representative of it; they represent the higher thinking, the folding of space, the ordering and classification of thought: the rational world. Geometry is a regular occurrence in my making. The vessels made in the most basic way with all the marks of the making present, none of the features smoothed or hidden, are also occurrences. They represent the intent of making in its most basic form, without any use of tools. Sometimes the intent is defined and clear and sometimes the intent is just an exploration of possibility. My practice is a conversation between these two occurrences, a constant drift or a *flannerie* as described by Baudelaire. *The Situationist International* (SI) also created a ‘theory of the *derive* (‘drift’)’. For them, the *derive* was a strategic and calculated form of ‘reconnaissance’, survey, mapping, allowing the construction of situation where these experiences of living could happen. When I make, I use a haptic and intuitive approach to manipulation with what I would call trial and not errors but tribulations. They

are possibilities, which sometimes are odd, and sometimes exiting. This drift, deambulation, between the rational world, the intent and the primacy of making provides a situation where the experience of making can happen.

Through this meandering the excavation of places away from the main paths reveals new ground, past experiences and revived memories. It is not the mental memory which makes it powerful, it is the revival of the body's memory. The memory of the gesture, of the movement. The body is the reference point by which we situate ourselves in the world; we are the physical 0.0 reference point, which is the base of our understanding. Merleau Ponty (1962: 170) states that 'Bodily experiences force us to acknowledge an imposition of meaning which is not the work of a universal constituting consciousness ... My body is that meaningful core'. My body is a source of how I acquire some knowledge; by touching a pot I judge the thickness of the wall by the space in between my fingers. I judge the temperature of a fired pot by applying my tongue on it and feeling the moisture retention.

Repetition and Alliteration: Alliteration has more to do with prosody and rhythm than with the meaning of words in themselves. The meaning they provide is atmospheric. In my work, alliteration enables groups or families to be created. The processes used also facilitate the repetition. With the use of templates, the general form of the various pots is the same. Different possibilities are explored while the making and the assembling takes place. Some of the differences in the pots are going to be due to the limitation: a smaller clay slab might mean that the pot is going to be narrower or smaller. Sometimes it might be due to accidents – while rolling a handle the roll of clay might fall and the shape then might be something I would like to replicate. The pots within the same family are also finished with the same glaze. The relationships and the tension within these families can be observed through their apparent similarities, shape or process.

The yellow pots in Figure 4, as well as being done using concentric templates were a representation of how people navigated and interacted within a given landscape and with each other. This was inspired by a trip to Dartmoor.



Figure 4.

The moors provided a natural landscape where no paths are predetermined and everyone can make their own. For de Certeau the everyday and its practices are also a place where humans can reclaim their spatial and social liberty. This is exemplified by punk, but also by the practice of *parkour*. Within the studio, makers do re-appropriate and adapt to fit their own individual practices and their preoccupations.

The process of template and slip cast is conducive to alliteration and repetition. Whereas when working with templates one can alter and change as the making goes along, the slip casting is different as the outcome is pre-determined as a mould is used. Alteration can be done after the casting, but the shape cast will remain. The context of the object is changed by its multiplicity.

When creating surface patterns I also use repetition. I take a single element and replicate it to create an ensemble, which becomes a unity itself. The original element is lost in the whole picture and represents a point of reference.

The repetition is also that of a physical action. This repetitive (and sometimes obsessive) manipulation is essential. The physical manipulation of a 2D plane, which is folded, organised, becomes a cognitive tool, a source of knowledge. 'What is learned must go beyond merely doing things. Visual literacy and critical appreciation develop not as independent, abstract capacities, but out of direct experiences of actual doing' (Salmon 1995). Repetition also transforms new things into common ground. The same action repeated day after day loses its experiential feeling when it becomes a habit. In the 1930s Tom Harrison conducted a mass observation survey on everyday life; a woman reported that even though she was doing the same things every day, on Tuesdays (the day she recorded her day) it all felt more important. It was of special significance – special because recorded.

The repetition also brings a Zen/meditative state, a zone where one's mind is open to possibilities and allowed to drift.

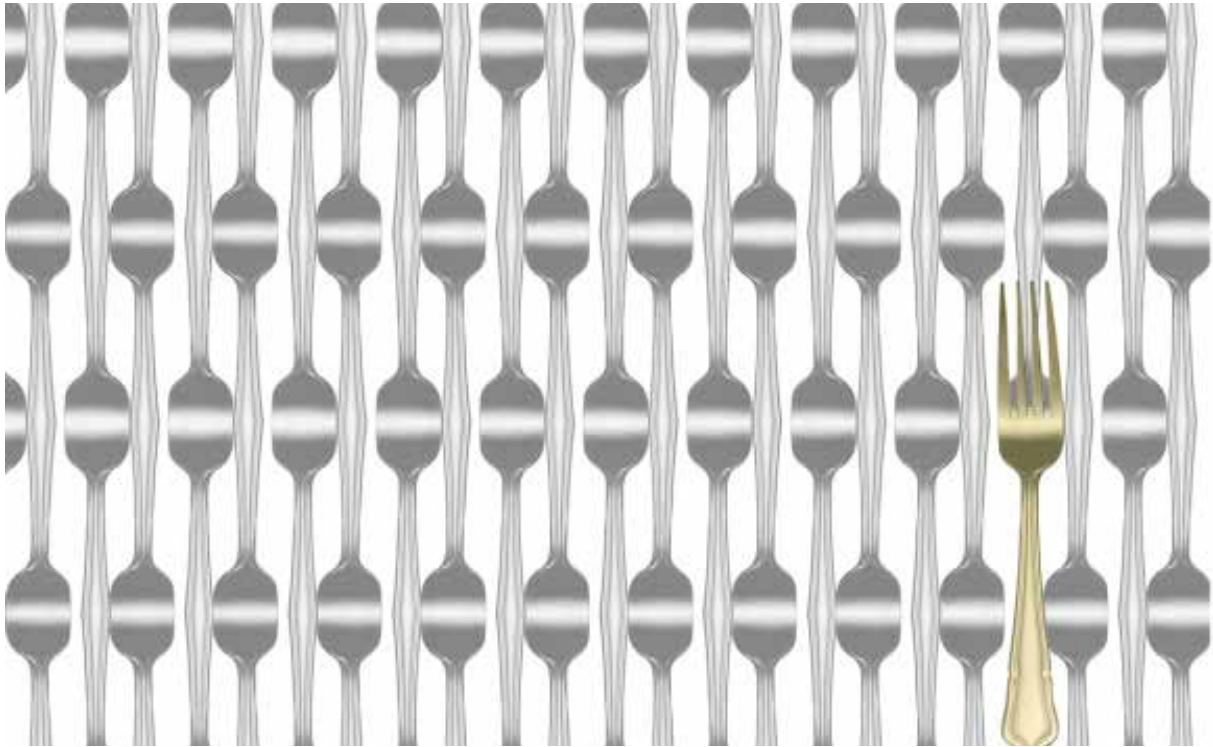


Figure 5.

As a maker, as a person, I am an assemblage of situations and experiences, of happening and interpretations. I use the activity of making/thinking as a dialogue with myself and with the materials encountered. When an artefact is finished it becomes autonomous. For me this is the end of a sentence with an opportunity to create other sentences, other chapters. The artefact also starts a new conversation with the people who use it, see it and feel it, independently of myself.

Concluding but not concluding

The circumstances of making are not always ideal. Being a maker is about finding new ways of doing, making and conversing, exploring new ways of evolving and being. Reflecting about and around making, this creates an insight into ways of operating. Makers are people who are expressing their personality and ethics in what they are making and how they are making it. Their responses are as different as they are different makers. This is expected from them. There are many occupations where one's individuality is not necessary or expected, only one's ability to achieve a task. In this respect makers are privileged as they use their voice in their work. This ability of voicing gives opportunity for an embodied practice to exist. What I do, how I think, what I am, how I operate is reflected in my practice. It is also part of my practice and it is part of me.

In a traditional sense, design ideas are often explained by a working model of a specific project, ways of communicating these ideas are generally with two and three-dimensional elements, such as drawings and models. Design also has a meta-narrative. It is simply less formal than the meta-narrative of research and enquiry, and it is nearly always located in the pragmatics of a specific project rather than in the inquiry of a broader context within which it is situated. This latter sentence underlines my approach; my objects also play a part, a role in research communication. Depending on what we research, how we do it and how we communicate, the inquiry process and result involve such objects and the relationship they have with words.

Words are necessary to exemplify or illustrate aspects of a research problem. Nevertheless, the act of research, the process of inquiry, the impulse for knowledge, takes place in the human mind. We use words to

communicate, what we think about anything from one human mind to another. For some kinds of thinking, we have explicit and unambiguous symbolic languages to communicate specific kinds of thoughts. We use words to explain how and why we came to focus on a problem. We use words to describe the work others have done on our problem. We use words to share states of mind, both abstract thought and emotional feeling. We use words to communicate how our thinking evolved, and to share the considerations we may have on any subject or matter.

Two-dimensional and three-dimensional artefacts can support communication by clarifying the objects of inquiry and the underlying ideas. When engaging in practice-based research, two-dimensional or three-dimensional artefacts can be part of the research process. But images and objects alone cannot communicate the mental acts of inquiry. Two-dimensional and three-dimensional artefacts cannot explicitly represent the complex range of events and issues involved in attempting to solve problems. Neither can they raise or address the wide range of issues involved in any project nor the layering of meaning behind the origins and the becoming of the project.

My practice requires and depends on narrative, explicitly my narrative or '*petit recit*', as Lyotard would describe it. This is because I need words to narrate the enquiry of making in the bigger context. The immediate narrative, the '*petit recit*', tells me about the project at hand. The metanarrative tells me how the project at hand functions and fits within the larger context of making and problem-solving (see Sevaldson 2010).

The world we have created is a product of our thinking. It cannot be changed without changing our thinking. (Albert Einstein)

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