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Brisbane Australia

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[Jewell, Sharon](#)

(2014)

Wonder and method. In

*GEOcritical AAANZ Conference 2014*, 5 - 7 December 2014, Launceston, TAS. (Unpublished)

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## Wonder and Method

Sharon Jewell

In this paper, my aim is to address the twin concerns raised in this session - models of practice and geographies or spaces of practice - through regarding a selection of works and processes that have arisen from my recent research. Setting up this discussion, I first present a short critique of the *idea* of models of creative practice, recognising possible problems with the attempt to generalise or abstract its complexities. Working through a series of portraits of my working environment, I will draw from Lefebvre's *Rhythmanalysis* as a way of understanding an art practice both spatially and temporally, suggesting that changes and adjustments can occur through attending to both intuitions and observations of the complex of rhythmic layers constantly at play in any event. Reflecting on my recent studio practice I explore these rhythms through the evocation of a twin axis: the horizontal and the vertical and the arcs of difference or change that occur between them, in both spatial and temporal senses. What this analysis suggests is the idea that understanding does not only emerge from the construction of general principles, derived from observation of the particular, but that the study of rhythms allows us to maintain the primacy of the particular. This makes it well suited to a study of creative methods and objects, since it is to the encounter with and expression of the particular that art practices, most certainly my own, are frequently directed.

My impetus for the paper was a recognition of the difficulty of outlining models and methods, that adequately represent creative practice while not undermining the specifics of materials, processes, or "outcomes" since there seems to be no practice left, once these specifics become abstracted to frameworks. What I am suggesting is that creative practice, like the natural environment, its elements and aggregates, does not inhabit generalities; rather it unfolds in particular, non-predictable ways, where patterns are always on the brink of changing.

An example taken from my practice that perhaps illustrates this difficulty of arriving at models through particulars, is the idea of collecting, which adequately

describes a part of my recent working method, whereby I have lightened the earth around my home by the weight of more than five thousand small, round stones of various iron and ochre content. These stones made their ways into three major works: *Mineral down* (Figure 1); *Curtain*; and *Tent cradle*. Yet on reflection, the idea of collecting does not cover the nuance and intricacies of a process whose terms initially seem so clear. A simple summary of collecting becomes complicated if I want authentically to incorporate *what* I am doing, with *how* and *where* I am doing it, so that its singular meaning might become clear.

Collections, it could be said, are defined by species or types of things that play off each other in quantifiable terms of difference and similarity. Yet when I bend down to the earth to seize one stone after the next, each stone presents to me a different sensual level. As my eye falls upon the next stone, that singular object is momentarily differentiated from the aggregation, thus appearing counter to the notion of collecting as a coming together. Is this, then, an act of gathering, as much as it is a serial attunement, an act that derives from a *valuation* of these objects, a fascination that never finds a root cause? While it may be enough to refer these actions to collecting – reducing the particular to a model – and leave it at that, the reduction, I believe, misses the rhythm of selection, of returning in eagerness to a place of abundance, of noticing, selecting, handling, pocketing, of explaining to passersby, of feeling the weight of the stones in my pockets, of the red and yellow pigment left on the hands, and of selecting again when it comes to incorporating them into the work.

These are layered acts of valuing inscribed by an approach of care and attentiveness. I have chosen 1000s of stones, marveling each time at a new roundness, a particular colour, a fresh weight and size. Collecting manifests as an emergent valorisation of unique qualities, where difference is a kind of vibration that shimmers between the pieces. Rather than resulting in an amassing, this process results in one, many times over. If models can only be derived from the event *after* the event, then it is necessary to make a selection of what will best represent what happened, a filtering of the infinite intricacies of reality, must be led by a valuing. What I mean to show by this example is the difficulty I have with

reductive models, and statements about methods. Everything ends up requiring more explanation than a model can handle, and methods and models become analytic devices, to arrive at the conclusions that suit. Properly represented, the “how” of practice should resemble perfectly the “what”, the map fitting the territory. A number of writers have recognised this in different ways.



Figure 1. Sharon Jewell, 2013-2015. *Mineral down*. Organza, stones, stitching. 3200 X 1450mm

Paul Feyerabend, insisting that “(v)ariety disappears when subjected to scholarly analysis” (1999, p.12), refers to an epistemological anarchy at the heart of scientific knowledge, where methods break down in the face of the abundant diversity of the world in the event of being a world. The wonder of things gets subjected to a normalisation, which, far from representing those things, is fundamentally different to those things. This presents a real problem in science where method and models have long formed the basis for descriptions of a general rather than particular reality. What happens when reality gets in the way of models? As Thomas Kuhn (1996; 1962) has shown, the continued, irrepressible occurrence of anomalies can eventually amount to the drama of a full paradigm shift, though these moments are signal and rare. In creative practices, the inconsistencies between models, or ideas about things, and the world of matter, broadly shows that materials have their own ideas about things, and that tensions between speculation and material event are constant, a way of being in the world, rather than the exception to a supposed general consistency of things.

Isabelle Stengers advocates a materialism that is not abstracted to models of knowledge, but is understood only within the context of its relations with struggle (Stengers, 2011). Coming, as she does from a Marxist perspective, struggle here refers to a dialectical struggle, which shares some commonalities with struggle in the creative event. She writes “the demands of materialism cannot be identified in terms of knowledge alone, scientific or other” (2011, p.368). She comments on Donna Haraway’s book, *When Species meet*, noting a materialism that “may be connected with the many struggles that are necessary against what simplifies away our worlds in terms of idealist judgments about what would ultimately matter and what would not” (Stengers, 2011, p.371). So she is saying that to reduce the complexities of the world and its struggles in the event of being a world, to frameworks of knowledge or models, we are not only oversimplifying the thing, and misrepresenting it, but we are also making serious value judgments in what we choose to include in the model and what we choose to leave out.

What can models offer, then? I had initially intended to form my discussion around Pierre Bourdieu's image of practice where he offers an analogy of a team game that incorporates an account of time, of space, and of the mysteries but also the intuitions and certainties that can relate to an art practice. Bourdieu explains how the player adjusts not to what "he" sees, but to what he *foresees*, "sees in advance in the directly perceived present". (1990, p.81). He makes instantaneous decisions but in response to an "overall, instantaneous assessment" (of every team player and opponent.) Bourdieu makes the point that he does this in very particular conditions that exclude distance, reflexion, analysis etc. The assessments are only possible in practice. Nicholas Abrahams refers to a similar phenomena, where, in repeated actions, consciousness anticipates, drawing the future into the present in a way that establishes a push and pull between the tenses, characterising consciousness as rhythmic. He writes: "rhythm begins at the precise moment when I anticipate a recurrence in the essential mode...." (Abrahams, 1985, p.77).

In his book *Rhythmanalysis*, Henri Lefebvre elaborates on rhythm as a way of understanding this spatial-temporal integration. The term *Rhythmanalysis* was originally coined by Pinheiro Dos Santos in 1931 and revived by Gaston Bachelard in his *Dialectic of duration* (1936). Lefebvre, in the final work he wrote before his death in 1991, extended the poetic in Bachelard's account to seek out the rhythmic patterns that determine the small and large events of urban spaces. He suggests there are two ways of proceeding in an investigation of rhythm: One can "study and compare cases" and, in the spirit of scientific or philosophical analysis "arrive at general conclusions" (2004, p.5), moving from the particular to the general. Finding inadequacies in this approach, he suggests that "instead of going from concrete (particular) to abstract (general), one starts with full consciousness of abstract in order to arrive at the concrete" (ibid). Broad concepts, he argues, such as rhythm *have specificity*. This is important: the concept, rhythm, *is* specific, is real, not an abstraction or a model, derived from the real, to be found wherever there is repetition with difference. Lefebvre states that the events implied in this model, provide a "framework for analyses of the *particular*" (Lefebvre, 2004, p.15). The relevance of the rhythmanalysis to art practice can be summarised in Lefebvre's

claim: “Everywhere where there is an interaction between a place, a time and an expenditure of energy, there is a rhythm (ibid).

Lefebvre writes of cyclical and linear rhythms, those which are constant and those which are open to rupture and change. He begins from the understanding that all matter is made of rhythmic structure, therefore is a manifestation of time. The multiplying of rhythms, from all levels, from the constancy of the heartbeat, to the cycles of life and death, the weather, the climate, walking, even thinking overlay in a present moment which Lefebvre calls a polyrhythmia. He defines it as the “simultaneity of the present (therefore presence), the apparent immobility that contains one thousand and one movements” (2004, p.17). This seems to give an explanation to Bourdieu’s perception of the future in the present through an overall awareness. Implied in an awareness of the polyrhythmia of things is an awareness of their next moment. Lefebvre writes that rhythms are always given in a dialectic structure, such as cyclical and linear, internal and external, where interferences can trigger changes, and where repetition eventually gives rise to difference. He writes of rhythm that it “reunites quantitative aspects and elements, which mark time and distinguish moments in it – and qualitative aspects and elements, which link them together...” (2004, pp.8, 9).

Written almost thirty-three years before Lefebvre’s *Rhythmanalysis*, but published in English twenty years after, Gaston Bachelard wrote of rhythmanalysis as the restoration of “two contrary temptations in a situation in which ambiguous being expresses itself as ambiguous being, as the being that has dual expression.” (2011, p.61). For Bachelard, rhythmanalysis belongs to the poetic imagination where “two contrary qualities attach to a single substance, or a single sensation” (ibid). Such is the dialectic structure of the stone blanket, *Mineral down*, which I made between 2013 and 2015, from the light and watery fabric, organza, and thousands of small stones, giving an object that is both light and heavy, that cannot be synthesised to a weight that averages the sum total of the materials. Not only do I feel the total weight of the mineral content, but

simultaneously, the individual mass of each small piece, and the ethereal lightness of the organza itself.

The dynamics of rhythm lie in their openness to change. Each rhythm is susceptible to a breach, a rupture: materials, the labouring body, repeated gestures, spaces reach their limits; the body tires, or ignites with unexpected energy, internal thoughts mingle with external material agents with no regard for architectural boundaries; these, after all are just another rhythmic sequence. So the rhythms that are manifest in the works are really just an extension, an answer or counterpoint, to those that thicken and extend outward into the world and inward to the heartbeat, the breath, and diurnal cycles. The struggle, the repetition, the resistance and the fallibility, the reserve and fortitude of all these material-temporal things, including the layers of nested spaces by which these events are intimately bound, reveal themselves as the space and time of practice. It would seem then that a geocritical position might also be understood as *rhythmocritical*, temporalising the space in which a practice is realised. Thus for the next part of this presentation, I will turn my attention to the studio space specifically in relation to the ideas presented so far.

The studio I work in is, in many ways, typical of a good or adequate working space. It is typified by a series of horizontally and vertically aligned planes: Floor, ceiling, table surfaces on the one hand, and walls, windows and doors on the other. Chairs, like people, are both horizontal and vertical, while benches interrupt walls, in a narrow lateral band. The horizontal planes tend to afford, or facilitate, work, movement, the fall and placement of things, while the vertical tend to mark out limits and sudden ruptures – doors for example – to those limits. I inhabit this space as a largely vertical element, whose horizontal movement across the floor, is interposed with more arced gestures as I negotiate the spaces between horizontal and vertical surfaces. There is a continuity between inside and out, where these aligned surfaces give way to less planar limitations, the tumbling, bustling, wayward axes of overgrowth insisting on a presence through the open wall that faces north.



I would suggest that it is to the nature of the space I work and live in that my materials – paper, fabric, board (surface materials) – owe, to a large extent, their primacy. These materials align themselves, and pull against, the rhythms of the space in which we all meet, but they also bear the trace of an imposed temporal rhythm which is the repetition involved in their processes. Sudden moments of difference, of change, can be related to what Bachelard describes as “poetic time”. They are welcome ruptures to familiar rhythms, and herald new patterns altogether. Richard Kearny writes of Bachelard’s poetic instant: “it marks an inaugurating power, a gratuitous beginning where the sudden will to change is marked by a deep joy of decision” (Kearney, 2008, p.38). Bachelard refers to the *poetic moment* as a shift from horizontal time to “vertical time” invoking again the axes that have informed this discussion in relation to space. And I find in my work that these moments of change or difference do come in the form of an altered direction: an upward movement from the horizontal, or an outward movement from the vertical. Drawings on tables present different propositions to drawings on walls. Tables invite engagement, while walls profess a respectful distance, so that to create a rupture with an outward or upward projection, is also to disrupt the protocols of the encounter.

A final example from my studio work that illustrates the ideas presented in this paper, in terms of the necessary consideration of the temporal event of space and material, and the axial determination of the space of work, comes from a rethinking of the context of the drawing. *Tracks dissolving in a drift, 1, 2, and 3* are large – approximately 200 X 150cm – drawings, made up of tiny marks, like little dust particles, exposing and losing track lines as they gather around narrow ribbon-like tracks and then fall away. As they fall away the tracks also disappear (see figure 2). The rhythmic forces here are very clear, with a kind of counterpoint operating between the swarmed marks and the intermittent tracks. The first of these drawings was made with the paper attached to the wall, such that I was variously crouching down and standing on a ladder to access the far reaches of the estate of the paper. The moment of transfer of the drawing from the wall to the table represented a break in the rhythms of work, and a change in the patterns that defined the process. It was a moment of becoming different. I

encountered the drawing as a weight, a substance: what was invisible, receding space, asserted itself as a cumbersome load as it flung from the stability of the wall and slumped around me, completely enveloping me. My body became a transport between vertical and horizontal.

Once on the table, the rhythms of the process were augmented by an encircling of the drawing, with no determination of up or down. I hovered over it perhaps like a surveyor of land, but my proximity made me more like a nomad across the plane of the paper, and this is how I proceeded with the remainder of this series of works. What am I to make of this, except to suggest that in the arcs between horizontal and vertical, change is possible? The play between them, whether large and expansive – whole body, floor - or minute and intricate – fingers, inching across the paper – is constant, layered and interweaving. Rhythms also exist between works and bodies of works, and in the pulses of energy that animate the day, the year, the lifetime. What one chooses to observe in the rhythmic mesh, is as open as what one chooses to regard as important to method. The very selection informs much regarding the creative intuition as a more literal analysis. The drawing becomes an index of its very genesis.

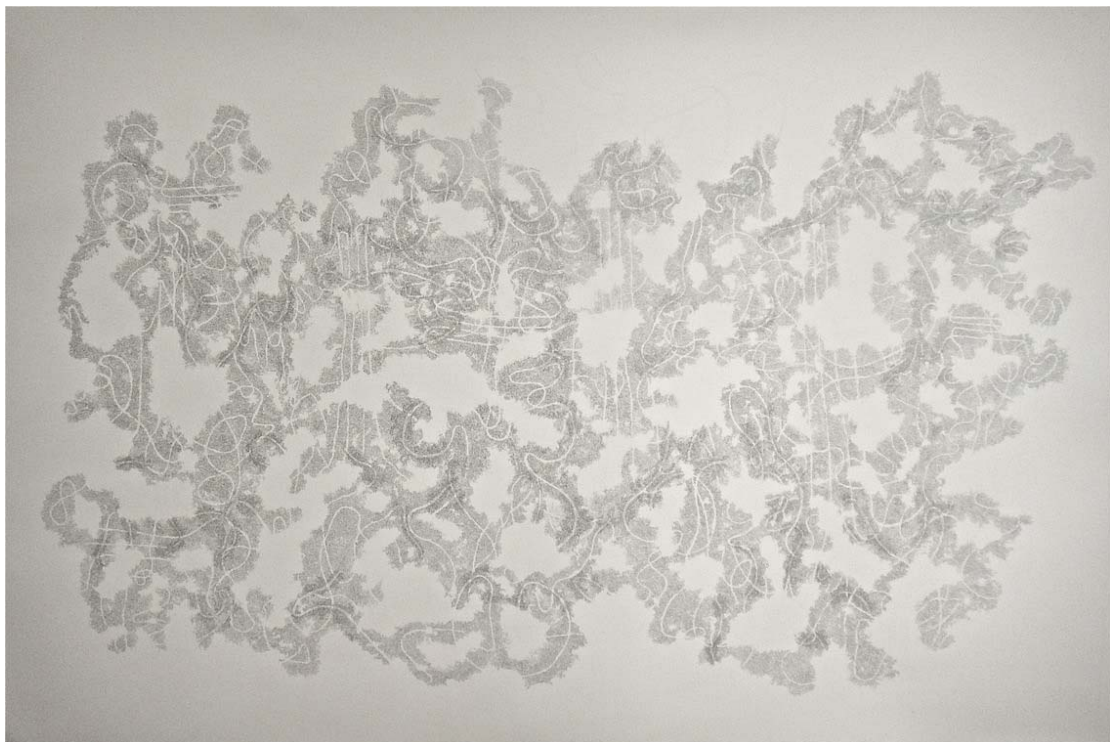


Figure 1. Sharon Jewell, 2012-2013, *Tracks dissolving in a drift 1*. Pen on paper. 2100 X 1485mm

Observing first the rhythms of a practice – time, place, energy exerted – before the analysis of discrete objects or forms, offers an intricate understanding of the ways in which things happen in the constitution of a creative practice, acknowledging both patterns and differences, considering all variables, all levels of activity within a given field of focus, the boundaries of which can be infinitely expanded or contracted. What I wanted to show by these examples was that by examining the materials and spaces and times of practice from the point of view of their rhythmic functioning, one can develop an image of that practice that places the particular at the centre of the model, since rhythm is present within on all the variables. Taken to its full extent, the rhythm analysis would take into consideration the heartbeat, the weather, the ambient sounds and give a more thorough rendering of the small repeated gestures, such as the stitching, against the wider rhythmic interludes that span one work and the next. The polyrhythmia becomes such a dense meshwork, that it becomes necessary to peel back, to reveal any sense at all. The dialectic structure of rhythm, as Lefebvre and Bachelard develop it, suggests the inherent quality of change in a creative practice, but also the necessity for bringing an attentiveness to bear on the broad and the intricate.

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