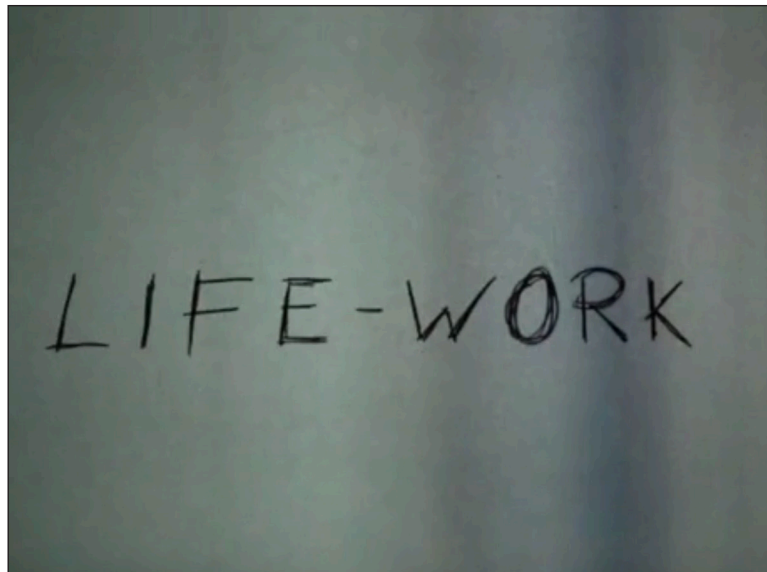


Structuring the personal in *Life-Work*

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This paper investigates my practice research *Life-Work* (Cornall, 2022) and offers a reworking of its original exegesis. The aim is to reexamine the creation of the work in 2020, emphasising its practical aims that were missed when I presented the film at a conference. The discovery is an idiosyncratic attempt to create a personal structural film and respond to Hollis Frampton's (*nostalgia*) (1971). Working from Barbara Bolt's material handling (2010) I argue this personal discovery is important research for reinstating practical knowing.





Research Statement

In this article I will chart the history of *Life-Work* and offer a reworking of my exegesis, in line with my research development. The motivation for this comes from Bolt's research on material handling (2010: 27–34) and a quote from T.S. Eliot that Christopher Frayling uses to capture the uniqueness of practice research. It states,

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time. (2021: 24)

Life-Work was created in 2020 to satisfy 50% of an undergraduate experimental film module, where the criteria was to respond to a week's theory; I chose the structural film (the other 50% was a reflective essay, the theoretical and practical divisions are apparent, Bolt argues this undermines material thinking, see 2010:33–34). The film was edited just before the COVID-19 lockdown and lay dormant for two years, like many of us, until it went on a further exploration at a conference in 2022. I argued the film was an example of thinking and feeling on screen and in the spectator (the rationale was from Rainer Werner Fassbinder, see 1977:20). The presentation was wholly disconnected from the film's material creation, my artistic process and I made no attempt to discuss the tacit knowledge I brought to *Life-Work*. Robin Nelson defines three *knows* in his methodology for practice research, evidently I was only discussing the *know-that*, what the research could do, rather than how and why the research had been done (2022:46). With that in

mind, I would like to develop my original statement on the film, in line with Stephen Goddard, who states, “An exegesis can neither exist as the final word, nor an end to meanings” (2010: 119). Hence, I would like to circle back to the creation of the practice and search for the *how* and *why*, rather than attributing theory from the top-down.

We journey back to where the practice started; it is 2020 and I have just watched *Wavelength* (Michael Snow, 1967). A canonised structural film, consisting of a slow forty-five-minute zoom into an apartment wall, with minimal drama, colour stock changes and the sound of a rising sinewave, it was an experience. At the time, I was befuddled by the colossal juxtaposition between what I had *seen* and Snow’s summary of it. He stated, “I wanted to make a summation of my nervous system, religious inklings, and aesthetic ideas” (Snow, 1967). This led me to question: how a film could be so formal yet personal? The natural progression of my own inkling was to watch (*nostalgia*) (Frampton, 1971), a film no less committed to its form though more involved with personal material. However, the personal is deceptive. The film features twelve photographs, shown individually, on a burner, that gradually destroys them. All while being guided by a narrator’s musing about *the* photograph. When the photograph is used of its energy it is given an extended silence. The deception is the disjunction between sound and image. The narrator feels like they are explaining the photograph, though this quickly becomes false, and the game ensues. This was a significant moment in my research narrative, that led me to think how had Frampton achieved all the different thoughts and feelings in me, with such a minimal disjunction between sound and image. It was in this viewing that I found my artistic process *from* Frampton. The repetition, the materiality, the mixing of personal data with structure and the consequences of sound and image. Rachel Moore reads the film as,

a kind of curing trip in which Frampton keeps the gravedigger at bay by developing and incorporating his own history, opens wounds so that they might heal, replaces that which is lost or in peril of being so, and burns them in order to activate the present. For Frampton true presence, unfettered by the past or thoughts of the future, was ecstasy. (2006: 15–16)

I had these unexplored feelings and a desire to bring my past to the present, to interrogate my own history and lay it all bare, I wanted to provoke the gravedigger (see Frampton, 2009: 33–50). My concerns were my family history, my father’s job and the cities I had spent time in the past and the present. These were the wounds to be disinfected, the memories to be set free and ultimately a route to find my own practice process (*Life-Work* has been acknowledged in my PhD thesis as an important practice precursor).

In this enquiry, it is clear I had significant elements to play with, *Wavelength*, the idea of a structural film being personal and (*nostalgia*)'s effect on me. I had abandoned these elements when I presented the film as theory alone and it is here that I would like to bring in Bolt's article arguing for the importance of material thinking. She discusses David Hockney replicating Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres's portraits. Hockney states, "I was captivated by his very beautiful portrait drawings uncannily 'accurate' about the features yet drawn at what seemed to me to be an unnaturally small scale" (2010: 27). In astonishment, he posed the question: "how had he done them?" (ibid). With that, he set out on his idiosyncratic practice research (Ibid., 29). Though, the methods are different, I asked the same question: "how had Frampton done it?". How had he mixed time, history, existence, materiality, personal anecdotes and objective feelings, all under a tight knit structure? Bolt states that Hockney's work demonstrates, "a knowing that arises through handling materials in practice" (2010: 29). Regarding my own work, I had tacit motivation to film trips to the sea, a hundred-year-old family photograph, farm animals, my father at work, certain locations and buildings, places we used to travel as a family, and many more, this was the knowing that arose from the material process of handling the camera in relation to (*nostalgia*). A knowing captured through filming.

Consequently, when I come back to *Life-Work*, I feel I know this place for the first time. The film emanated largely from practical concerns, from going out and finding the tools and images to create my summation, like (*nostalgia*), before a large part of the theory was attributed. Undoubtedly, there is theory and its connection to the film is important, although there is a need to prioritise its earlier aims. As stated by Bolt,

Heidegger argues that we do not come to "know" the world theoretically through contemplative knowledge in the first instance. Rather, we come to know the world theoretically only after we have come to understand it through handling. Thus the new can be seen to emerge in the involvement with materials, methods, tools and ideas of practice. It is not just the representation of an already formed idea nor is it achieved through conscious attempts to be original. (2010: 30).

It is here that I would like to focus the knowledge produced in *Life-Work*. The film is a fluid artefact of the material process (three processes) I went through to understand and explain (*nostalgia*)'s effect on me. I had to go through the process to *know* what the film would be and in doing so it became an idiosyncratic attempt, not a reproduction. The film as process reworks my original exegesis and supports Estelle Barratt's claim that, "researchers [need] to shift the critical focus away from the evaluation of the work

as product, to an understanding of both studio enquiry *and* its outcomes as process” (emphasis in original, 2010: 135). Although, I am not the first to acknowledge the pitfalls of prioritising theory over practice, it is important to acknowledge that my individual journey is important practice research. Hence, we “arrive where we started” with the *same* film, with a renewed focus on material knowledge and a deeper appreciation of the film’s tacit construction. The outcome of my re-examination shifts the focus onto the practical knowing and has shown the (re)discovery of knowledge in the process. To go back to work with your toolkit and to find the work anew, to handle it again and think deeply about what, why and how, it was during construction can offer powerful insights for your own artistic development. I argue this is important for the wider community to engage with (Bolt, 2010: 30 and 33).

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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