Title: From the Life to the Locked Room: applying the Chaîne Opératoire to the pedagogy of the copy

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Abstract: In response to the recommendations of the Coldstream report (1960), to qualify for validation, art courses across the UK engaged in a decade of restructuring and broadening of their course delivery. Emphasis was placed on the alignment of classical traditional methods and art technical skill along with Art History and later Complimentary Studies (1970). The balance of these relationships and what constituted technical processes had become less clearly defined. This paper explores whether between the years 1969-1973 the pedagogy of the copy continued to be instrumental within radical teaching projects, centered on and around St. Martins. Using the ‘A’ Course as a case study, how tutors collectively approached the development of alternative teaching methods, where the class itself became a site of a continual experimental process is discussed. To explicate the teaching rational, a framework, in the form an Operative Sequence is applied to a selection of projects that made up the course. Both the structure and methodology of their design and content are analyzed in order to ascertain, whether they dispel a genealogy and technical memory in the form of the copy and if this can be considered to be both evolutionary and dynamic.

Keywords: ‘A’ Course; Copy; Chaîne Opératoire; Mimesis; Pedagogy; Technology; Tool

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Bio: Elizabeth Wright is an artist and senior lecturer, 3D Pathway Leader on the BA Fine Art Course at CSM. Exhibiting internationally since 1995, research on mimesis and the copy informs her art practice. She has been commissioned to make both temporary and permanently sited art projects with: curators working in the public realm, Locus + and Commissions East; inter-disciplinary research centres, Tyndall Centre and architectural practices, FAT and MUF. Recent exhibitions include: Atelier Amden, Switzerland; the Museum für Gegenwartskunst, Siegen, Germany and a forth coming exhibition in 2017 at the Joan Miró Foundation, Barcelona, Spain.

Working, with Louisa Minkin, artist and MA Fine Art Course Leader at CSM, they are developing the pedagogical project ‘ Photo-Sculpture’, that considers how, current 2D digital archeological capture methods can be utilized within 3D spatial modeling platforms. An activated presentation of this work will take place, ‘Annihilation Event’, exhibition, at the Lethaby Gallery in March 2017.

Since the ‘A’ Course Inquiry’ in March 2010 and the process of archival activation by the Mayday Rooms that followed, the pedagogy of the ‘A’ Course, a radical teaching experiment at Central St. Martin’s continues to remain a contested territory.[[1]](#endnote-1) Questions were raised by the ‘Inquiry’ concerning the programme from 1969-73, whether it was planned beyond the first five-week project and if just one or all four staff were instrumental in its design? Could it be shown, that there was a genealogy to the course, that accounts for both its own evolutionary dynamic and the formation of the project’s rational; perhaps both the course design and authorship should be re-credited? As there was no course handbook, can the application of an operational sequence to the course structure and the artworks produced, explicate the project’s methodology? Referring to both previous, ‘A’ Course projects and first hand accounts written at the time, subsequently by the staff and some of the students that took part, will provide wider reference material to establish, whether the use of the *Chaîne opératoire* or Operational Sequence is an appropriate system.

Originated for the analysis of flint knapping the Paleoanthropologist-ontologist André Leroi-Gourhan developed the Operational Sequence to denote all social acts involved in the life cycle of an artefact *(*Gourhan1964*)*. Whilst it has predominately been applied within the fields of archeology, as the Operative Chain puts emphasis on every stage of artefact production it could be a suitable system for locating a developmental sequence within art pedagogy. In this instance the system will be used to both analyze the materials, apparatus and methodology of the projects and the overall impetus of the ‘A’ Course in exciting previous academic teaching. In order to trace whether there was a genealogy to the course, the Operational Sequence will be used to find how this both materialized and evolved.

Restructuring and broadening art courses that were aligned with purely classical tradition and art technical skill became the focus of the *Coldstream report (1960)*. By incorporating the delivery of Art History, the report laid out the terms for courses to qualify for the Dip.AD accreditation; leading to degree status being awarded to recognized art school courses. Through this process of certification the number of approved courses in England dropped from 201 to 61. A decade of experimental teaching models ensued, culminating in the second *Coldstream Report*  (1970) that made further recommendations for the delivery of Complementary Studies.

Previous to this period the dominant rational of the art school was aligned with mimetic instruction; for the majority, the first two years of study involved observing and recording inanimate objects, from natural forms, plaster busts, culminating in a progression to the life figure. All four of the ‘A’ Course staff at St. Martins, Peter Harvey, Peter Atkins, Garth Evans and Gareth Jones had studied under this mimetic system; for both Peter Atkins and Garth Evans their formative study was at the Slade School, which had been instrumental in the development of these methods (Kardia 2010, 91). Later as tutors at St. Martin’s the extent to which this system of instruction was systematical removed or redeployed through their project design, will be further explored within the Operation Sequence.

Throughout this decade (1960-70) at St. Martin’s the staff attempted to broaden the curriculum through the development of experimental projects. During this period, Peter Atkins had a consistent presence, moving from part time to full time lecturer[[2]](#endnote-2) (Kardia 2010, 94). Originally set the task by the Head of Fine Art, Frank Martin in 1964 to co-ordinate the first year studies for students across the separate painting and sculpture courses, referred to as the Advanced Course; Atkins introduced studies in Structure, Perception, Formal Analysis and Notation (Westley 2010, 35). Within these discrete areas, to support students in linking the material’s used, aiding them to help focus the future direction of their work, this aspect of the course was referred to as the Documentation Model. Malcom Le Grice one of the course tutors produced a detailed report, in describing its methodology, he drew particular attention to the significance of how environment influences practice (Le Grice 1965, 1). Developing these areas of curriculum and by asking the students to record and map their own method of study, it could be considered that this was formative of the ‘A’ Course genealogy. Within the Documentation Model there is an attempt to prioritize the first stage of material procurement; this will be seen to be of primary importance in the Operational Sequence.

As testament to their commitment to developing pedagogy, before setting the projects, wanting to find out how apt they would be, the staff undertook their own trial. The notion of documentation, was explored in the project ‘Paint it Black’ proposed by Le Grice and undertaken by four other staff, Atkins, Adams, Darrah, Thorpe, Le Grice, (Adams 1966, 1, 2). Thorpe quotes Le Grice as saying, ‘Intended to open up questions and to allow content to emerge’ The staff set themselves the task to produce a joint painting, ‘working in sequence for 15 minutes at a time, with strictly no verbal communication – all communication taking place by the modification on canvas of the other person’s statements.’ (Adams 1966, 8). The second and parallel event was concerned with ‘each person documenting his own thoughts, intentions, and alternatives at each stage in the action of the first event’ (Adams 1966, 6). The staff’s documentation was displayed with photographs taken of the project so that the following day they could discuss at length to try and figure out how it might be possible to arrive at a non-blacked out painting, (the staff in turn had obliterated each other’s gestures). Undertaking the project in silence, continuous modification of the artwork, observation of the act of production, communication through materials and rule-based instruction are prosaic throughout the ‘A’ Course. This project can be seen as engendering an approach that could be procreant to the genealogy of the ‘A’ Course.

In 1969 following this extensive period of pedagogical enquiry, Frank Martin invited the ‘A’ course tutors, to devise a new course for students joining in September, the first cohort to undertake the accredited Dip.AD qualification [[3]](#endnote-3) (Kardia 2010, 97). Whilst, earlier projects had been trialed by staff, the new course tutors hadn’t previously worked together, so during the summer and before the start of the course, they planned the first project, agreeing to adopt the situation of the artist studio as their model (Jones 1984, 25). Awareness of how the studio established associative relationships with particular activities, (correlating equipment with space), had been previously raised by Frank Martin, who had in this case divided the Life Room in to two separate sections (Tate Archive, Frank Martin Collection, TGA 201014). One side of the room was lined with: trestles, pedestals and tailored life modeling equipment; the other side was emptied of material, equipment or reference to any life form. This physical action of strict division locates Martins attempts to dissuade mimetic instruction by allowing alternative associations to be forged.

In keeping with this act and wanting to break any previously held spatial associations that the new students might bring; the staff established in the A2 studio the emptied partition area of the Life Room that Martin had previously founded.[[4]](#endnote-4) Whilst Martin’s, division had been established through organizing and moving the tools of mimetic instruction to one side. The ‘A’ Course tutors created a physical material divide by building a room with a lock that could be bolted on the inside and a set of written instructions pinned to the interior wall of the space. Through these partitions both Martin and the ‘A’ Course Staff acknowledged both the agency of space, the materials or tools that might be held within it and how the method of material and tool procurement might denote a type of action or preordained activity.

To trace the extent to which these spatial demarcations, systematically removed or redeployed mimetic instruction from the Life Room to the Locked Room, the Operative Sequence will be applied. How the studio tools, materials and life subject were reintroduced into the space that Martin had previously put into contention by separating the tropes of mimetic production to one side will be traced. When first devised and applied to flint production the ‘maker’ in the operative sequence is the ‘flint knapper’, as producer of the flint the ‘knapper’ is considered to be the ‘human agent’. When this system is applied to the ‘A’ Course, the ‘human agents’ are both the tutors and students. What roles the tutors assumed in distilling the studio conditions of an artist within the locked room and the artwork that was produced in this situation will be discussed.

Tracing the cultural transformations or pedagogical changes and their impact on the supply and properties of raw materials that the ‘A’ Course students used, formulates the primary stage of the chain. The first project that the students undertook in the Locked Room involved five materials, (for a duration of a week, per material), singularly placed, one for each student, in the following order: a polystyrene cube, roll of brown paper, string, plaster, water (plastic Bag) and stop watches. (fig.1) The rational for their selection, was described by Garth Jones as being based on the formal properties of bloc, sheet, line point, fluid and time (Jones 1984, 26). In his notes on the course he described the reason for their selection as being no different from the Life Room, by supplementing the figure for the polystyrene cube (Jones 2010, 7). Each week the materials underwent an endless interrogation, expanding into the physical manipulation of the space. The tutors rejected any requests for alternative materials; students therefore turned their attention to the surrounding space, unscrewing light fittings and any other substitute media that they could immediately find. (fig. 2)

In his essay ‘Exhaustive Process Sculpture’ Jones describes how the students responded to this material invitation, ‘There were two innovations. First, their use of materials was non-hierarchical; there was no object and remainder, secondly, the materials were used over and over again; there was no conclusion, only transformation. All was process’ (Jones 1972, 1). Included in his essay are responses from Garth Evans and some of the students who took part. Whilst Evans went on to suggest that the process was the product, to the extent that ‘to be warmed, made to cough, made to obtain a drink’ should be considered the evidence of this sculptural activity. The student Richard Deacon rejected Jones account of what had been happening in the studio, ‘I don’t think I am practising E.P.S but am trying to be inside of the sculpture’, he uses the following description of the environment to support his claim ‘In the A2 studio there is and has been very little which does not have an intimate relation to the space and to ongoing work – its difficult to find the furniture or the rubbish’ [[5]](#endnote-5) (Jones 1972, 11). In Deacon’s description the fabric of the space has agency; becoming an active material. (fig. 3) The reference to being ‘inside the sculpture’ and the account of the space suggests that the room could be considered to be part of the artwork, elucidating Deacon’s suggestion that he is within the work.

In the first project, by constructing a separate lockable studio, the, space is made both active and performative. Rules were pinned to the wall, laying out times that the space could be accessed, what was not allowed to happen in the space (talking, bringing in consumables). (fig. 4) There was a fixed duration of time that the Locked Room could be occupied for, when the duration of the working day started, ended and the timing of breaks. The staff themselves orchestrated the performance; as gatekeepers, the students had to negotiate if they could exit or enter outside of these fixed times. Becoming sequenced, attention is given to the method of occupation and observation; site forms part of the technical gesture, linking space, material and act. The provisionality of each of these components and the influence they exert on production is an integral part of the operative sequence.

Within all of the subsequent projects this sequence and gesture continued, from drawing attention to discrete areas within the room, to shifting the projects to exterior sites beyond the art school. The move from interior to exterior was gradual, as the shift in focus to different stages of the sequence and the affect it might have on the chain. In the project that followed both the act of observation and the nuance of space took precedence. In the ‘Sitting Periods Project’ the students, seated at set times took on the role of observer, that the tutors had previously held (‘A’ Course Feb 1970). Instructed to occupy an area within the room, their names fixed to the back of a circle of chairs, each student was given a set time when they could make work, whilst being observed by the sedentary group. (fig. 5)

A further nuancing of space and observation occurred in the ‘Area Designated A Project’ (‘A’ Course Sept 1972). (fig. 6) Similar to the sitting project, students were directed to only make work for a day, when instructed, in a designated area that had been demarked by the letter ‘A’ fixed to the wall in a section of the studio. The materials and actions were left to the students to select. On his designated day the student Andy Darley read Ho Chi Minh’s Prison Diary. (fig. 7) As the staff regarded this as a legitimate activity the emphasis of the technical sequence was on how the students forged a relationship between site and action; previously this had been prescribed. In later projects the materials were chosen once again by the staff, the activities moved out of the school, students were sent letters instructing them to make work in set locations or to collect materials from a particular location and enact a set activity. (‘A’ Course Dec 1972). (fig. 8) At all times they were instructed as to where their projects would take place and for the durations of time that they could occupy this prescribed space.

As the projects distilled a spatial awareness attention was also given to the technical activity that took place within it. To access any tools to work on the given materials in a preset space, involved a request to tutors who then confirmed whether or not the tools could be retrieved from the technician’s store. Attention was given to how tools played a role in the technical activity that the students were engaged with; the role that the tool might play in the transformation of the material and how it might inform the manufacture of their artwork. Technology forms the second stage in the operative sequence, how the tool is made becomes an essential ordered train of action. For the second cohort who undertook the ‘A’ Course in their second term the students were given ‘The Essential Equipment project’ (‘A’ Course Nov 1972). Instructed by letter to make a selection of what the students considered to be their essential tools. John Burke produced a wall based presentation of all of the tools that he used within his work, ranging from chisels, gloves, overalls, a safely helmet and visor; with the protective clothing, con-figured as student by proxy overlooking his own display. (fig. 9) Another student Peter Venn, instead of making a physical presentation, wrote a description of what he considered to be his essential tools. He challenged the notion that a tool could be an object but rather, an essential influence that he described as a being from a higher order, ‘This order is not concerned primarily with the identification of ‘things’ as ‘things but with perception, that is with the ‘things’(objects) as Intentional Objects’ (Venn, 1972).

Within the lens of the ‘operative sequence’, this statement would be understood, as referring to an interior memory that Leroi-Gourhan would suggest is independent to Venn’s own. This would be the primary technology memory or tendency that operates separately to the ethnic group, in this case to the students and staff (Steigler 1994, 58). No matter what took place within the project, this primary memory would continue unimpeded by the group’s actions. Instead the group’s secondary memory would be influenced by the environmental factors that the staff and students encountered. The artwork that the students produced would become the concretization of the movement between the first interior memory through to its exterior second stage (Steigler 1994, 155, 158, 178 ). This movement forms the technical fact. The artwork that is produced in this third and final stage is the exteriorization of this technological process (Gourhan 1964 229, 258; Steigler 1994, 152). The invitation to the students to present their ‘Essential Tools’ also suggests that there is an acknowledgement and an elevation of the technical fact by the tutors.

Whilst this technical fact so far encompasses the procurement and display of tools, for the ‘A’ Course an understanding, as to the genesis of tools extends, similar to Venn’s, beyond just the material hand tool. In every project there is a written instruction with a set of rules, which become part of the courses techné or technological process (Steigler 1994, 82). Instead of just a manual explaining how to use a tool, these rule-based instructions become instrumentalized as tools in and of themselves. The rules behave in parallel, within a continuous loop of self-referencing; they are their own manual, with their own list of instructions, for the appropriate operative action undertaken by their own tool self*.*

These rule/instruction tools were omnipresent, on the walls, within the letters of project correspondence containing, constraints, obligations and procedures. (fig. 10) The staff collectively became the embodiment of institutional rhetoric; their letters signed, the ‘Group A Staff’. To distill this tool they became interchangeable, rotating their presence, with two staff always present (Jones 1984, 25, 26). Garth Evans referred to the formal voice that the group adopted (Evans 1974, 3). The enhancement of the tool extended to the adoption of disguise; on one occasion, one of the staff went to a theatrical shop and bought moustaches, with the intention of disrupting staff relationship with the students (Evans 2014). This disruption was part of the tool design, what Atkins referred to as ‘Conceptual Indexing’ a term that describes the references and associative acts that each material carries (Venn 2013, 1). The projects were set to frustrate these connections; by removing secondary notation in the form of photographs and written notes; to direct engagement with a material, the students were being asked to assimilate new experience rather than processing previous facts.

This rule/instruction tool could be seen as a counter tool. By instrumentalizing rules and instructions, the staff, were making the students aware of the institutional ‘tool manual’, in order to become familiar with how the rules operated so that they could be re-written. Whilst students did attempt to break rules, John Burke ripped the posters down in the materials project, only to be told to remake then. Baz Herman, in the same project set a polystyrene cube alight, in another, he wrote ‘ Fuck off’ on the wall and escaped from the window in the locked room. Both Evan’s and Jones were worried that the students hadn’t rebelled enough and where equally concerned at the lack of dissent. They visited Basil Bernstein after his lecture on Cybernetics at the ICA, who told them that they had engendered trust, which is why the students hadn’t rebelled (Evans 2014). Jones in his account of the second day of the course stated ‘There is still what could either be termed passive acceptance or an embracing of the rules by the students. The latter seems more plausible since within the structure of the project each student guards his contribution carefully. As if they are enforcing the rules’ (Jones 1969, 5).

Instead of Jones’s observation, the tool was introduced by the tutors, with the knowledge that it’s own redeployment was inscribed. In this instance, it could be said that the students were instead copying the rules. Similar to the traditional act of copying the life model, this action is one of replication; instead of the figure, the rules are reproduced. Jones continues in his observations of the first material project, ‘The seeming limitations of the singular material has perhaps forced students to work alike: that is not to say imitation but rather a personal investigation and extension of the obvious general attributes to working the material. In a sense this is refreshing in that there is no premium on novelty rather on the evaluation of the quality of the act’ (Jones 1969, 5). Rather than mimetic, he understands their action as a uniform parallel response to the material. This default, away from replication suggests that there is an exterioization of the material attributes that the students have collectively produced. In the final stage of the operative sequence, their response to the material would be termed ‘liberation’, a freeing from their habitual behavior, as observed by Jones within the group collective action (Gourhan 1964, 253) In other areas and stages of the course mimetic strategies, are embodied within liberation. In his final show, Tim Jones produced a set of identical paintings, ‘Chapeugraphic Art Series’, made by copying photographs of Felician Trewery a Chapeugraphic Music Hall Artist, bought in Portobello Market. (fig. 11) Depicted on one canvas, divided into nine sections the chapeaugraphic act(a painted copy from photographs documenting a material evolution.) The ever-changing characterization of the chapeau graphic artist, involving the transformation of a simple piece of felt into any number of shapes to represent the headgear worn by particular characters, which Trewery reinforced with the appropriate facial expressions. (fig. 12) Tim Jones’ choice of subject appears to distill the operative sequence of the ‘A’ Course, where he identifies in Trewery, a performative process of material transformation. In these sequential images we are witnessing by default what the students had been forbidden to make, a series of course notations. (fig. 13)

With recourse to Lerio-Gourhan’s notion of a primary memory that operates independently to the ethnic group, Tim Jones’, depiction could be seen to both visualize and acknowledge the presence within the course of this dynamic technological process. As Jones employs mimetic tools, copying a photograph that is recording a performer copying a set of rehearsed actions; mimetic tendencies can be seen to be part of this primary memory. Continuation of ‘the memory’, was upheld by Peter Venn; after leaving the course he sent letters to other students including Darley and Burke with a set of instructions asking them to respond to a written description of his work. No longer a student, Venn replicated the tools of the course by employing rules, instruction, observation and response. Copying components of the first, through project revision, a ‘meta-project’ is formed thereby continuing how the staff had previously revisited key aspects, either focusing on rules, site, material or observation. If it’s upheld that a primary memory informs and continues despite the ethnic group then a mimetic techné is part of the genealogy of the ‘A’ course and it’s legacy.

1. The A Course: An Inquiry March 26th – 27th 2010, Schedule devised by Garth Evans, Garth Jones, Peter Kardia

   and Anthony Davies at CSM Charing Cross Rd, London.

   ‘A’ Course Archive – (Mayday Rooms),an educational charity founded as a repository for historical

   material linked to social movements, experimental culture and the radical expression of marginalised figures and

   groups.

   The ‘A’ course was a unique pedagogic experiment founded by four members of St. Matins Staff, Peter

   Atkins, Garth Evans, Garth Jones and Peter Harvey originally planned as a 5 week project called the

   Locked room, which after the first year came to be known as the ‘A’ Course. This was course that had a significant

   impact on what was taking place in British art education at the time [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Peter Atkins was later known as Peter Kardia [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. In 1963 Frank Martin had applied for accreditation, this was only awarded to St. Martins in 1969, the equivalent of

   a degree qualification. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. A2 studio was the name of the studio that the Locked Room and subsequent projects took place in [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Deacon makes reference to Donald Schon, *Reith Lectures of 1970* [↑](#endnote-ref-5)