

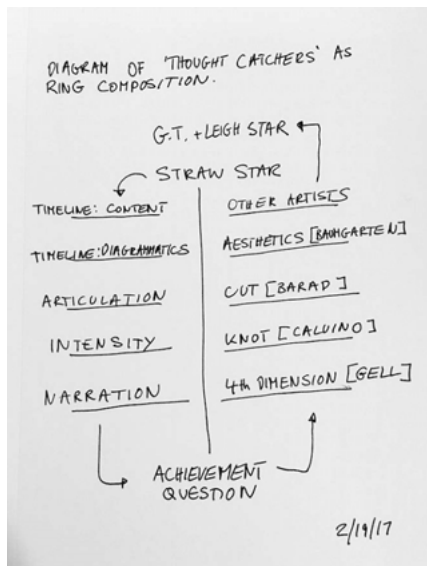
Thought Catchers. An Artist Talk

ADELHEID MERS

INTRODUCTION

This introduction could be a pre- or post-amble to »Thought Catchers.« It could also be an extended footnote, placed at its »hinge«, as you will see in a moment. »Thought Catchers« is a »Kunststück,« not in the sense of a piece of art, but rather of acrobatics. It performs. This is indicated by its subtitle, »an artist talk«. Formally, it is a ring composition. It emerged as such, fully formed. I recognized its structure because I read Mary Douglas' book, *Thinking in Circles* (Douglas 2007), which she opens by speaking about her motivation to write it, citing the disrespect the form receives, either because it is not recognized as meaningful, or because it is perceived as outdated. It is perceived as outdated because it is assumed to be grounded in oral tradition. The form has withered away with the rise of writing and associated linear thinking. Here is a sketch of the structure of my text, an introduction (Straw Star), followed by descending sections on the left, connected by a hinge to the ascending sections on the right, completing the circle with a »latch« that attaches it to the introduction. Sections on the left and right are parallel, meaning their content is related:

Diagram of Thought Catchers as ring composition (2017)
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Thought Catchers opens with the Straw Star section that introduces my »first« and »current« art works, the first being a piece of childhood craft, and the »last« a diagrammatic template through which I parse information I glean from events such as conferences, and often from conversations with other artists. I then introduce the »Timeline«, a visual device I used in 2001 to understand a significant shift that occurred then in my work, from sculpture and installation to my current diagrammatic work. I present examples of the installation work first, and then show how it has been formally related to diagrammatics throughout. This leads into a discussion how part of my work as an artist is to create cohesion among my inquiries. I present that effort in three short sections, titled »Articulation«, »Intensity« and »Narration«. This completes the descending branch and sets me up to bracket the body of work discussed through the timeline, which by now has been well thought through, with the newly arising Straw Star on one end, and my current work at the other. With that, the timeline finds an updated context. As the childhood Straw Star is quite different from later work that was undertaken as an adult, a question arises: What is an artist's achievement? That question creates the hinge in the ring composition. From here, to address that question, sections arise in parallel. »The 4th dimension« draws on anthropologist Alfred Gell's conception of the artist's oeuvre, which he discusses as non-linearly interlaced through time, much as I discuss individual works as attractors for narrative. »The Knot« is a very short paragraph, citing Calvino's visualization of a poet's oeuvre as a knot or tangle, giving a shape to what he perceives as his episteme. The relation to »intensity« on the descending branch is subtle. Calvino's piece is suffused with a breathless anxiety he seems to diagnose in the authors he discusses, which is caused by shifting relations between reality and understanding, at the end of the millennium. Since I did not address this in the main text, I include this notion here. »Cut« parallels »Articulation«. It draws on Karen Barad to develop a notion of working in the thick of it, mindfully embodied and responsibly.

»Refrain« quotes Alexander Baumgarten, in Latin to point to the early origins of his considerations, and in English from a very recent translation, to show his ongoing relevance in asserting that Aesthetics is a way of thinking, deeply engrained. For the parallel in the descending section, I understand diagrammatics as the shape my aesthetic perception takes. As I continue to describe my current work, it is clear that it is work with others. The shape of other artist's aesthetic perception becomes what my work is about. Thus, it closes the rising section of the ring. For the latch, the closing piece, I am evoking Grounded Theory, with a quote by Leigh Star. I show how my process resembles parts of Grounded Theory's method, and point to its foundation in Pragmatism.

So, why this »Kunststück« and not a linear text? An interest of mine is to work out how part of the work of art is its tending towards language. A significant part of my process is to speak with artists about their work, and to derive an »epistemic engine« from what I learn in that conversation. This practice has evolved from participation in studio critique, which at its best draws on careful observation in a performative environment, as a professional conversation that draws on experience, embodied knowledge and exemplars. It is conventional to state that the making of artwork is not accessible to introspection. I do not agree with that »black box« theory. The making of art arises neither from the obscurity of »inspiration« or the orderliness of »intent«. Instead, an embodied thought process that works in tandem with attention and articulation uses language as it does other materials. »Thought Catchers« is an example of such language in action.

THOUGHT CATCHERS

Straw Star

In January 2016, I came across a box containing my childhood arts and crafts, about 500 pieces. In the box I found a straw star. Three pale, short stalks, crossed, wound together with a white string – a Christmas ornament. There were three related collages: each contained four stalks from a different batch of straw in primary colors, flattened and glued on paper, intersecting in the center; more stalks delineated the edges of the paper. Two of the collages also contained lines, drawn with felt tip pen around the center, one a closed loop, the other an open spiral.

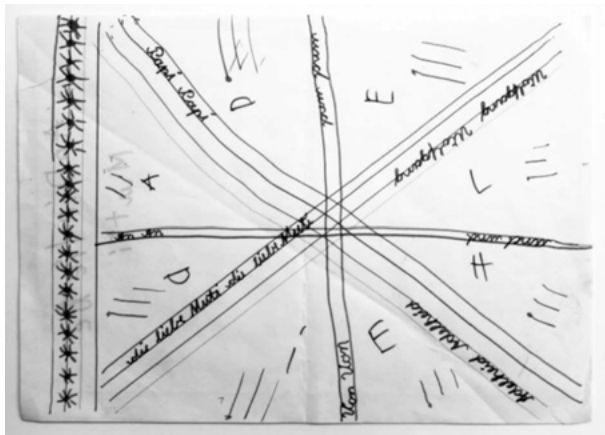
Action: Cut a length of string. Set aside. Take a bundle of straws. Select three. Cross. Observe Rotational Symmetry. Space evenly. Lift while maintaining the relation. Shift to one hand. Grasp string with other hand and wind around intersection. Tie knot.

Action: Take a piece of paper. Observe its rectangular shape. Lay it flat. Take straws. Flatten. Glue in this order: vertical, horizontal, diagonal top left to bottom right, diagonal bottom left to top right. Then glue stalks along the edges. In the gaps around the center intersection, draw a line with a felt tip pen.

Then there was a drawing, made entirely with felt tip markers – red, blue, yellow, green, black (faded to brown) – four intersecting axes, two doubled (vertical and

horizontal), two quadrupled (diagonals), again forming a star. On and aligned with the eight ensuing segments were inscribed words (all doubled), running counterclockwise, starting with the top, vertical segment that bisects the short dimension of the paper: from, myself, and, brother, and, dad, to, dear mom. The eight letters of my name placed in each interstice, along with three short marks each, clockwise, starting to the right of the vertical axis that bisects the long dimension of the paper. A border on the right, made of four vertical lines, filled with many, tiny red dots from which a varying number of legs jut out. On the reverse side, along the top of the short side of the paper: »To dear Mom!«

Letter (ca. 1968)



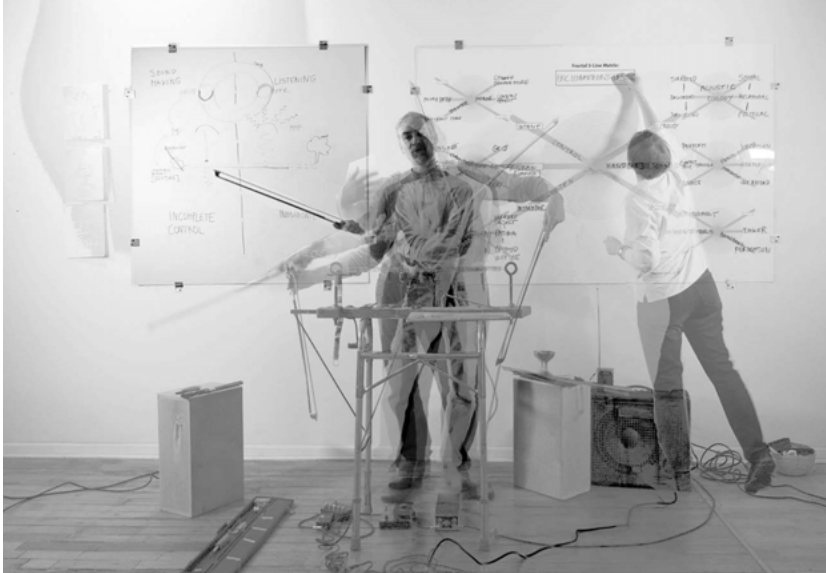
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Back to the present. In recent years, I have condensed large amounts of information – for example notes from an entire conference – into single diagrams. From that emerged a template that helps me in parsing any type of content. I call it the fractal 3-Line Matrix. Three intersecting lines – two diagonals and a horizontal – form a star. Additional small versions of this star are placed at the six ends of the one in the center. Around the center of each star winds a faint spiral, to indicate axial mobility and the tacit presence of additional dimensions.

To use this template, I first read my event notes and highlight what stands out, in multiple passes. I then place elements I perceive as focal onto the three central lines. At the ends of the central lines, I place two terms that significantly contribute to defining the focal terms. The three lines intersect for two reasons. The first is to avoid a hierarchy among the focal terms, which represent main themes. The second is that I want to be able to spin the lines, so the terms at the ends of each

axis line up in different ways. That helps to relate the elements of the material to each other, to discern tacit dimensions. Thus stacks emerge on the right and left sides of the diagram that help tell a story. If I am so inclined, I repeat the process with the »fractal« at the end of each line.

Fractal 3-Line Matrix Template (2013) used here with sound artist Eric Leonardson (2016)



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TIMELINE

Once before I had an experience where a »first piece« matched the »most current piece«. In 2000, I found myself at a juncture, particularly uncertain about continuity. Until then, I thought of myself as an installation artist. From sculptures with mobile joints and modular floor installations I had moved on to light projections. A few smaller, gestural sculptures, casts of footsteps and hand movements, traced activations. In parallel, I taught studio classes and seminars. I read, took notes and assembled my thoughts in diagrams, handy tools for thinking and excellent mnemonic devices that supported course outlines, lectures and presentations. The work in the studio and at school was enveloped in the third arena of emerging professional participation. With my post-graduation cohort, I jobbed at the art fair, showed at artist-run non-profits, joined an editorial board, and parsed municipal and national funding

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opportunities. Attending a conference on cultural policy, a dispute about the legitimacy of artists' engagement »outside the studio« prompted my desire to articulate a position. I had the notion that a view might originate from within art practice, a better understanding of the work done by artists, worked out by artists themselves, that would enable new forms of organization, not in support of artists within the existing system, but spawning a reconsideration of values that could reshape the entire field. This system would be substantially different from the one that has grown up to support conservation, trade and interpretation of the objects artists produce. As I wrote my first paper, relying heavily on John Dewey's work, particularly »The Quest for Certainty« (Dewey 1988), diagrams accompanied each chapter. As I continued to read widely, diagrams summarized books. They soon took center stage in the studio. I began to think about their scale and about substrates. I wondered what this meant. My script had flipped.

As I pondered where my work was taking me, Duchamp's »Boîte-en valise« was on my mind. I liked the birds-eye view it afforded, along with the ability to arrange the objects. To achieve a similar perspective, I digitally assembled a time-line of works I made (and some I had looked at) over the span of two decades, to seek continuity between the new, diagrammatic prints and drawings and my previous installations. In my previous narratives, I had included work from as early as graduation, thinking of that as the beginning of a »professional« phase of my work. Now I reached further back. The first piece I had selected for inclusion in the timeline was from my foundation year at the Kunstakademie Düsseldorf, in the shape of a cross. Two, thin tree branches were tied together at a right angle with wire, the center covered with plaster in loosely human, female form. Crudely welded knives (my first attempt at welding) were attached at the ends. Looking at the assembled timeline, I remembered that the piece was prompted by my reading of Benjamin Lee Whorf's »Language, Thought, Reality« (1964). I remembered that what had attracted me to the text was a sense of freedom it sparked when I first read it, sometime around 12th grade. If the grammar of the language one speaks is intermingled with how one perceives the world, the existence of different grammars points to the flexibility of relations between self and world, even to coproduction. By making the timeline, I learned that the first piece I made in art school I felt strongly about had been a sculptural diagram. Through it, I had pondered the question of an epistemic cut, as performed with a custom-made tool. What this exercise unambiguously revealed was, moreover, the presence of diagrammatic means throughout, an exploration of a grammar of sorts (compare: Krämer 2016, 59–86). Recurring elements were modularity, mobility, negation of depth (figure absent ground), definition of playing field, and implied invitations to act.

Articulation

To make the timeline, I drew on ongoing efforts that are routinely part of art practice, to articulate how work hangs together. Part of this articulation is keeping track of recurring form, a simple tally. Intersections, rotations and circles have appeared throughout my work. Mobility and modularity are frequent. That invites photography into the process, to document variation. When using a substrate, its material is mostly acknowledged and often challenged. As ground, it may be subsumed into figure or otherwise annihilated. String, scribbles or writing attach to lines, sticks, or boards. Objects may become a stage, a place for performance that in turn alters them, if only momentarily. This prompts moves to time-based media to record interaction.

Intensity

Another measure by which to connect arising objects is to note the intensity of my reaction to what emerges. As long as I have made things, moments stand out at which the emergence of a new and, for me, unprecedented form is accompanied by an equally clear, calm, and arousing sense of validity that highlights this instance of form. Early on, there were drawings of stick figures seen from above; later, a bright red projection onto the ground, shaped by a hand-cut aluminum template inserted into a ceiling-mounted stage light – that one sent me running up and down six flights of stairs to manage my excitement; recently, a brush-drawn sketch of a generic landscape with a second set of skinny ink lines running across it, »catching« at each intersection with a loop.

Narration

These moments of pure intensity eventually become touch points for narration, but their immediate function is as attractors. Over time, works congregate around them. Works that came into being accompanied by this arousal illuminate works that are already completed, and inform others to come. Connections occur by observing or performing iterations in the same material, by carrying form or action sideways into other materials and even domains, and also by shifting towards them from parallel explorations. Narration tests for coherence, modeling how one piece spawned the next, or how a new piece was impacted by considerations of previous works, within and across media and areas of interest. New moments shift narratives that might otherwise settle.

The timeline had yielded a pattern; it helped me to understand current activity I needed to sort out by connecting to my first student work in a

meaningful way. Arriving over 15 years later, the straw star and its collaged and drawn cousins seemed odd. I had a sinking feeling. There was no denying the formal relation to current work, particularly of the »letter«. How can that be? There were embarrassing echoes of »My kid could have made that painting!« to which the standard response is: »But the artist works with intent.«

Clearly, an object crafted by a child carries no explanatory power if there is no memory of a state of mind, much less a possibility to discern intent. Moreover, there's a good chance I had adult help writing the words on the lines, the script seems to vary; my little brother or I might have written the letters in the interstices. There was no intent. But it was in my box.

My significant unease at finding the straw star hinted at prejudices I was not aware I hold, in part about the location of meaning, but also about the meaning of achievement and accomplishment. It prompted the writing of this piece¹. With that, I am drawing on a fourth way to craft continuity, which is to relate experiences to work by others, across disciplines.

VIGNETTES

The Fourth Dimension

In his book »Art and Agency,« anthropologist Alfred Gell speaks about an artistic oeuvre as a coherent distributed object, arising from a »cumulative process of discovery« (Gell 1998, 237). He claims the existence of »an *isomorphy of structure* [italics in the original], between the cognitive process we know (from inside) as »consciousness« and the spatio-temporal structures of distributed objects in the artefactual realm«. (Gell 1998, 222) Gell uses the example of Duchamp, positioning his body of work as such a distributed object. He argues for coherence by pointing out how works interrelate across time, in a »generate-and-test-model« (Gell 1998, 237), that works through Husserlian protentions and retentions: »Any given work of art, in gross terms, considered in the context of its maker's oeuvre, is likely to be both a »preparation« for later works, and a »recapitulation« of previous works.« Style, or »ingrained artistic practice«, which I understand to also refer to conceptual approaches, can thus be deployed to read a body of work as »a distributed object in time« (Gell 1998, 235). This object can be visualized as an »ideal model, in summary

1 Returning to this point in the text after I finished it, I am realizing that what I have at hand here is a ring composition (circle), or chiasmic (cross) structure. It has an introduction, 5 descending pieces, this hinge, 5 ascending pieces and a latch (Douglas 2007).

form, of the artist's oeuvre (as a distributed object) as a temporal-relational diagram or map« (Gell 1998, 236) or »as one indivisible work, consisting of many physical indexes (works) but amounting to a single temporal entity, like a persistent thunderstorm which is made up of many, quasi-instantaneous, flashes of lightning« (Gell 1998, 236). While Gell persists in ascribing intention to the creation of each individual work, he also holds that »the generate-and-test model of creative agency [...] reveals most clearly that ›thinking‹ takes place outside us as well inside us.« (Gell 1998, 236) Gell singles out Duchamp for discussion because of the artist's desire to visualize his process making art itself, specifically referring to two well-known works, *The Network of Stoppages* and *The Large Glass*. Gell emphasizes that »Duchamp downplays the ›merely‹ visible, or its illusionistic representation. Like Bergson, he distrusts our perception ›which is merely analytic and synthetic‹, and seeks instead the current of creative energy‹ (i.e. *duree*, or Heideggerian ›being‹) which ›gushes forth through matter‹. This is the fourth dimension.« (Gell 1998, 249) I am particularly intrigued by the interplay alluded to here, between a primordial current and a specific, epistemic shape that, importantly, the artist is understood as seeking to articulate for the full body of work, and that informs the logic of this entire body of work. This articulation is posited as the artist's achievement.

The Knot

The final chapter of Italo Calvino's »Six Memos for the Next Millennium« is titled *Multiplicity*. It considers the »contemporary novel as encyclopedia, as method of knowledge« (Calvino 2016, 129). Calvino leads into the chapter with a discussion of the work of Emilio Gadda, a novelist who has »developed a style to match his complex epistemology« (Calvino 2016, 130) to accommodate how he »sees the world as a ›system of systems‹ in which each individual system conditions the others and is conditioned by them« (Calvino 2016, 129). Calvino makes a point of conjuring up an image: »Carlo Emilio Gadda tried all his life to represent the world as a knot or tangled skein of yarn« (Calvino 1988, 106), or »as a tangle or jumble or ball of yarn« (Calvino 2016, 129). Calvino explicitly assigns an epistemic shape to a writer's practice.

The Cut

Karen Barad shifts the location of meaning away from intent to responsibility. In her model of the laboratory, I see the artist's studio as well. An individual no longer is a »knower« who relates »words« to »things«. The actor, or »agent« does not take the world as object, but is part of it as participant, both in material-

discursive phenomena and practices. This is how Barad models the laboratory: acting, in performing the »agential cut«, »part« of the world becomes determinately bounded, propertied [and meaningful] in its emergent intelligibility to another »part« of the world« (Barad 2003, 821). When Barad states »objectivity means being accountable to marks on bodies«, (Barad 2003, 824) she speaks about measurement, but again, this readily transfers to other modes of rigorous articulation. In its duality of doing and being, artistic experience rings through. »On an agential realist account, agency is cut loose from its traditional humanist orbit. Agency is not aligned with human intentionality or subjectivity.« (Barad 2003, 826) In the words that close Barad's essay, I hear studio conversation:

»Agency is the enactment of iterative changes to particular practices through the dynamics of intra-activity. Agency is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production [...]. Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering.« (Barad 2003, 827)

REFRAIN

»(§ 533) Scientia sensitive cognoscendi et proponendi est AESTHETICA (Logica facultatis cognoscitivae inferioris, Philosophia gratiarum et musarum, gnoseologica inferior, ars pulchre cogitandi, ars analogi rationis).« (Baumgarten 1983, 16)

»(§ 533) The science of knowing and presenting »proponendi« with regard to the senses is AESTHETICS (the logic of the inferior cognitive faculty, the philosophy of graces and muses, inferior gnoseology, the art of thinking beautifully, the art of the analogue of reason).« (Baumgarten 2013, 205)

SPEAKING WITH OTHERS

In 2008, during a residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada, a fellow artist invited me to his studio, asking for a diagram to be created as we discussed his process. This, with modifications, became an ongoing practice. Part of the process is to a) begin a conversation with the singular prompt: how do you work? I then b) take notes during the conversation; c) later scrutinize

the notes until a shape emerges from them; d) free-hand draw iterations of the shape; e) work it out, often in a graphics program on a screen; and f) return the accumulated artifacts to the artists for a follow-up conversation that may then g) lead to a new artwork in response. The Fractal 3-Line Matrix described above was eventually used to parse the content of conversations with artists as well, breaking what was one interpretive diagram into two versions quite different from each other. Now, I create a more intuitive model, an »epistemic engine« for each artist, and the dimensional, analytic 3-Line Matrix. With that, the epistemic engine drawing wants to be animated. Working with a programmer, animated and interactive, digital versions are now becoming a further iteration. We often attempt to express a »fourth dimension« we feel to be strongly present, particularly in visualizing conceptual artist's epistemes.

IN CONCLUSION

Questions that resonate throughout my work are these: How is work articulated? How does it emerge into language? How does it emerge into organization? Embedded in my work and prompted by finding a childhood artifact, the questions that came to the fore in writing this were the following: what is an artist's achievement? With Gell, it is marked by articulated reflexivity. How do work and meaning relate to intent? This is the issue at which the humanist tradition I was raised in (and that is also evidenced in Gell's text) snagged sufficiently to demand further inquiry. Barad shifts away from looking back at intent to looking forward to responsibility.

One additional reference arrived recently. Just this winter, in following the concept of Boundary Objects, developed by Susan Leigh Star and James R. Griesemer (Bowker et al 2015), I have been exposed to several lively texts about the emergence of Grounded Theory (GT) that of course also address its roots in Pragmatism. I strongly relate to GT's practice of coding data, simply and across dimensions; certainly the ample use of diagramming; a focus on action; and an interest by several of its proponents in attending to actions that constitute work, including deleted or invisible labor, as for example the work that takes place in the studio, but even more so, the work that happens in professional contexts, and on a yet deeper level, the work that allows for considering those contexts malleable, workable to begin with. In a text Star wrote about her own intellectual development, she sums up:

»One of the simplest and most difficult tenets of pragmatism is that understanding is based on consequences, not antecedents. [...] Rather, the

process is backward to most modes of analysis. In a sense, [...] one bares one's soul to the elements, and sees what happens.« (Bowker et al 2015, 133) Leigh Star reminds me that, having attended to the feelings the Straw Star elicited, it has served its purpose and it is time to let it go, for now. With that, this particular exercise closes.

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