Introduction to The Braid
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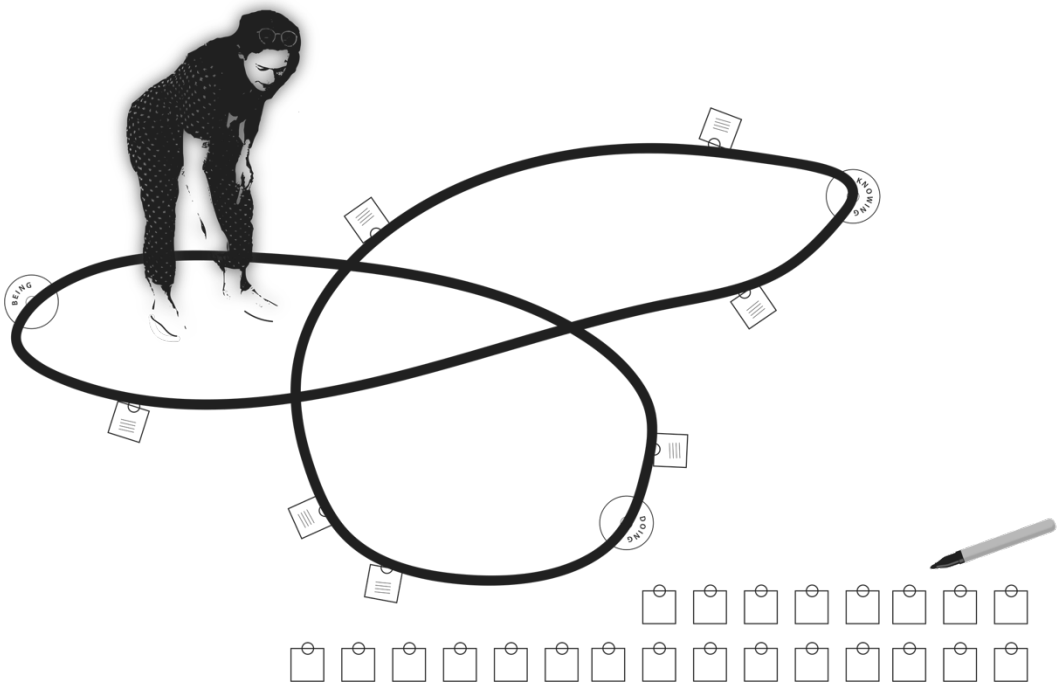

What constitutes Ground

Our exercise tomorrow, using **The Braid**, is about grounding you all more deeply in how you are working as artists. It can support you to feel, think and write more confidently about the work you are doing already. In turn, this can support artistic growth.

I have been intrigued by the question what constitutes a ground throughout my own practice, formally in the studio by grappling with the surface-substrate relation in painting, making low-to-the-ground sculptures, illuminating ground in light installations, and intertwining figure and ground in drawings and digital work; in the library I studied and diagrammed the structural foundations created by disciplines and institutions; in the classroom I developed assignments to reflect on all of the above, designing syllabi and curriculum. My short answer to the question what constitutes a ground is that “many figures form a ground”. What this means is that we all negotiate meaning in specific ways, individually and communally, across time and simultaneously.

To ease you into reflection about what grounds your own practices, I am about to offer **The Braid** as a framework that is both a diagram and a physical object. In small groups, you will be able to move and manipulate **The Braid**, and add notes to it while you speak with each other about how you work.

While I give you a little more context before the group work begins tomorrow morning, I would like you to keep the following questions in mind:

1. When and where are you currently able to speak about your work?
2. Do you speak more about what you make, or more generally about how your practice takes place, or even where your practice comes from?
3. Are there conversations you feel are missing?

I'll begin with a brief nod to philosophies of art and aesthetics. These philosophies have deeply shaped how we teach, perform, display, and support the arts. As part of what grounds us, they remain interwoven with our practices. This is reflected in the ways artists present their work.

1. "And then stories": making sense of artmaking through the lens of Aesthetics

I call the first way artists present their work "and then stories". As illustrated artist talks, they are chronological narratives of emergence and material practice. They may include social and professional events, including successes and sometimes failures. I am pretty sure all of us here have been trained in this form of narrative.

This type of presenting is rooted in the model of an artist working in the (expanded) studio, relying on personal inspiration and exercising artistic freedom. This model of being an artist has been taught in Academies of Fine Art that have been organized in the master/apprentice model since the 1600s. It has been discussed as part of the philosophy of aesthetics since the 1700s and remains at the foundation of the art market as it currently exists. At its extremes, the model is also associated with the image of the mad genius – tortured, brilliant, misunderstood.

The history of the genius is much more intriguing, though, and worth a brief excursion, initially going back about two centuries, and then almost two and a half millennia.

First published in 1790, Immanuel Kant offered this definition:

> Genius is the talent (natural endowment) that gives the rule to art. Since talent is an innate productive ability of the artist and as such belongs itself to nature, we could also put it this way: Genius is the innate mental predisposition (ingenium) through which nature gives the rule to art.

No human is a genius. Genius means spirit. Ingenium is the readiness for inspiration. The artist is endowed with an invisible opening through which nature channels form. This form is then described as original and exemplary. It should be studied and appreciated. Kant's last sentence in this section is illuminating:

> How that is possible is difficult to explain.[1]

As part of a philosophy of art, around 380 BCE Plato offered a metaphor for how inspiration takes place in the Ion dialogue[2].

> … it is a divine power that moves you, just as in that stone which Euripides calls a 'Magnet" […]. For this stone not only moves iron rings but it also imbues the rings with the same power so that they can do the same thing as the stone in turn—they move other rings and as a result there is a great chain of iron and rings connected to each other. But the power from that stone runs

> through them all. In this way, the Muse herself makes people inspired, and a linked chain of inspired people extend from her. […] For a poet is an empty thing—winged, and sacred and not capable of composing before it is inspired and out of mind, when thought is no longer inside. Until one has gained this state, every person is incapable of composing or giving oracles. Because they compose not by skill—when they say many fine things about their subjects—but by divine dispensation … .

Still familiar to Plato, the notion of being 'out of mind' is well established in even older contemplative, religious and meditative teachings, for example in the Vedic traditions of India. Even Kant's efforts show traces of an awareness of that. Writing shortly after the onset of the new mode of thinking, Natural Science, he did not know how to explain it in updated terms, though, so he attempted to root the art way of knowing in a special, but ultimately obscure connection to nature. And still, he funneled the older understanding of art into the modern era. He did this even though a writer who preceded Kant only by a few years, and whose work he knew well, Alexander Baumgarten, was already more in line with the new world view, having invented the philosophy of aesthetics as the science of an inferior knowledge marked by sensory understanding. We inherited the name Aesthetics from Baumgarten, but it remained connected with inspiration and genius because of the much more prolific Kant.

From within those strands, grounds for art are the divine, spirit, or nature. These intrude into the artist in a thoughtless, inspired state, which can be induced or is given as a talent, or may be achieved by enacting an inferior, sensory form of knowing. The "and then" narrative can also be considered as a form of show and tell, chronologically tracing events that are difficult to explain.

2. "Critical narratives": making sense of artmaking through the lens of Science and Innovation

The second way of reflecting on making art and presenting about it is to participate in critical narratives related to science and innovation. Science and innovation narratives first describe a puzzling observation or a problem, then frame an explanatory hypothesis or solution, and finally devise an experimental test or prototype. Social Practice Art, mainly in the US, and Artistic Research, mainly in Canada, Australia and Europe participate in these categories. Here, I am thinking about evolving institutional connections of the sciences and innovation to the arts. Why would artists develop an interest in such narratives, and when did this happen?

What is important to grasp here is that art education has only recently moved into the university. This summarizes it for the US: "Since World War II, artist training has become the charge of colleges and universities and contemporary art has become an increasingly academic and intellectual field. […] This change was financially scaled by the passage of the G.I. Bill in 1944, which allowed many World War II veterans to attend school, art school included."[3]Along with the growth the G.I Bill afforded universities, Arts programs became administratively integrated into a research focused system[4] that was at the same time beginning to define itself as 'creating new knowledge.' War had already shifted the European core of the artworld to the US. The socio-cultural and institutional critique developed by writers associated with the Frankfurt School[5], including Adorno, Marcuse, and even Benjamin added the human science of sociology to the artists' toolkit, adding the superior ways of knowing to the inferior ones addressed in the previous section.

With these new tools, art making in the US became intertwined with Civil Rights, Vietnam protests, Feminism, and Aids responses. To facilitate their new modes of working, artists founded organizations and became administrators. As artists became institutionally savvy, philanthropy began to take an

interest, and supported community-based work with underserved populations. [6]Municipal and federal entities became intrigued by the potential of the arts for ameliorating problems of urban development, with the NEA eventually supporting artist run spaces in the 1980s. This ended when Cultural and Creative Industries emerged as a new concept in the 1990s with a broader focus on knowledge workers in the technology and finance sectors. Soon, CRT with its deep roots in law intersected with art worlds and became part of reorienting artistic focus to social justice[7]. More recently, work now also loops back to the spiritual dimension of the arts that the scientific approaches obscured.

On a different path and with other funding avenues that include a much larger role for states, a rebuilt Europe, along with Asia, Australia and Canada developed arts PhDs, doubling down on scientific methods discussions. Here too, governments are now taking an interest in the functional contributions art can make to immediate problem-solving. Funded similarly to the sciences, Artistic Research also offers large grants and invites interdisciplinary teams of artists and scientist to engage with public policy around migration and other pressing longer-term topics. In this expanded institutional context, artists have learned to write artist statements, grant applications, and PhD dissertations.

The "and then" narrative remains closer to the art market, with its art schools, galleries and art fairs, and the pipeline of private art collections into museums. The science-informed narrative is closer to activism and philanthropy in the US, and elsewhere to post-secondary academia and public policy. Hybrids are found at biennials, which also feed contemporary art museums.

Having a sense of these histories makes it easier for artists to intentionally ground themselves across the above models. **The Braid** offers a third narrative that can further support reflection and the development of additional models. It is particularly valuable among rising institutional uncertainty.

3. Braided Narratives: making sense of artistic practice through an autoethnographic lens

The Braid is a mobile diagram. It is an outcome of my informal conversations with artists, including musicians, performers and visual artists. Each conversation started with the question "How do you work". Following each conversation, I visualized it as a drawing, and a diagram.[8] After many conversations, I noticed a pattern. Each artist spoke about their work with tangible materials, or **making.** Each addressed their engagement with language and communication, or **mediating**. Finally, each artist spoke about finding or creating opportunities, or **managing**. **Making**, **mediating** and **managing** were clearly perceived as interdependent. All were going on all the time, with changing intensity. A very simple image emerged to visualize this interconnection. It's a trefoil.

[hand out Braid model]

Around 1980, Donald Schön, a professor of Urban Planning at MIT, observed conversations between faculty and students at the Architecture school. Schön determined that the conversations were examples of self-reflexivity, as students and teachers compared how they developed ideas, additionally drawing on embodied experience. In his book *The Reflective Practitioner* Schön recommended to scientists in academia to integrate this way of knowing into their teaching[9].

In the context of research, a survey from 2025 discusses

> autoethnography [as] practice of reflexivity which means that researchers reflect on themselves as researchers, situate themselves as subjects in the research process, and consider how their perspectives and positionalities (e.g., gender, race, ability, age) influence the outcome of their

> research (MUNCEY, 2010). This self-observation is crucial because it allows for transparency and deepens understanding of how knowledge production is shaped by power relations and historical forces. Rather than claiming scientific neutrality, autoethnographers have emphasized the social construction of knowledge, using their personal experiences and individual memories as their main sources of knowledge. [10]

"Knowledge production shaped by power" is another way of saying **managing**. Addressing the "social construction of knowledge", we look at **mediating**. "Personal experiences and individual memories" resonate strongly with **making**. Even more broadly than Schön recommended, the sciences are drawing on a narrative mode that emerges from embodied practice.

Proposing similar patterns in his 1962 book, "The Structure of Scientific Revolutions", Thomas Kuhn established the term *paradigm*, modeling interconnected ways of doing science as an embodied practice, accounting for ways of knowing as part of the social construction of knowledge, and categorizing the being of reality in tandem with historic forces.[11] Doing, knowing and being were soon ported into academia, where, here in reverse order, PhD students had to establish the ontology, epistemology and methodology in their research [12]. Making is a form Doing, or methodology. Mediating establishes knowing, or epistemology. Managing relates to how being is organized, or ontology. While this is a much to abbreviated description, what it shows for now is that braided, paradigmatic, or autoethnographic thinking is already part of the art making and research processes. It reflects the ways in which artists are speaking about their work with each other. **The Braid** can help us to better grasp what we are doing already.

Tomorrow, we will untangle The Braid in its full size and lay it out on the ground. Going back to the first line above: This exercise is about grounding you all more deeply in how you work as artists. It can support you to feel, think and write more confidently about the work you are doing already. In turn, this can support growth. You will be invited to move around **The Braid**, and share with each other how you work: how you make things in the studio and beyond, how your way of knowing and making sense is informs how you speak and write about your work, and how you manage your opportunities in the world you come from and find yourself in.

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[1] §46, Kant, Immanuel. Critique of Judgment (1987). translated by Werner S. Pluhar, Foreword by Mary J. Gregor. Hackett Publishing Company, Indianapolis/Cambridge.
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[3] *https://www.wikiwand.com/en/articles/Discipline-Based_Art_Education.*
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[5] See: Arato, A., & Gebhardt, E. (Eds.). (1978). The essential Frankfurt School reader. Urizen Books
[6] See: Rosler, Martha. (2010) Culture Class: Art, Creativity, Urbanism. E-flux Issue #21. December. Parts I, II, III. https://www.e-flux.com/journal/21/67676/culture-class-art-creativity-urbanism-part-i
[7] See: Bell, Derrick (1988). White Superiority in America: Its Legal Legacy, Its Economic Costs, 33 Vill. L. Rev. 767. Available at: http://digitalcommons.law.villanova.edu/vlr/vol33/iss5/2
[8] Mers, Adelheid (2012). HOW DO YOU WORK? Conversations, drawings and responses. https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/133108/151290
[9] See: Schön, D. (1983). The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action. London: Temple Smith.
[10] Gonzalez Suero, A. (2025). The Recent History and Current State of Autoethnography in Germany: A Literature Review. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, *26*(2). https://doi.org/10.17169/fqs-26.2.4310
[11] See: Kuhn T.S. (1962). The structure of scientific revolutions. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.
[12] See: Guba, E. G. (Ed.). (1990). The paradigm dialog. Sage Publications, Inc.