

“Skin and brain develop from exactly the same primitive cells. Depending upon how you look at it, the skin is the outer surface of the brain, or the brain is the deepest layer of the skin [...] My tactile experiences are just as central to my thought processes as are language skills or categories of logic.”

‘A Handbook For Bodywork: Job’s Body’ Deane Juhan

My starting point is making; I see myself as a maker. I found myself saying to someone recently that I don't think that words are my first language. This got me reflecting on my early relationship with the material world and the roots of my identity as a maker.

I think I've always seen myself as a maker. When I was a child, it was shapes from clay dug from the garden or the old Quarry down the road, our oasis and playground. The soft sandstone in the quarry was easy to cut into with old blunt chisels and rusty files from the garage.

Looking back, I realise how lucky I was to have had access to some wild and abandoned places, landscapes collectively shaped by the imaginations of the children who lived around them.

Sticks, scraps of wood and old bricks became the foundations for new empires in our landscape of steep slopes, brambles, compact clay soil with flecks of slate and the occasional seam of clay. Digging to Australia - old lawnmowers and farm machinery archaeology were other fine group pursuits; the only thing better than making is making with a bunch of mates.

The Ivy hill and its hidden spaces, bouncy mounds like trampolines where roots had crisscrossed for years and years. Brambles and brambles and brambles, rusty barbed wire trodden down by generations of kid's feet indicating the boundary of the welder's Yard with rumours of a rifle kept in the locked shed. Don't go down there. The dentist's chair, a large sandstone boulder angled just so, a space to relax and look at the sky.

This patch of land was a world we built together, and it was experienced in a very physical way.

I remember the pride I felt in how I could scale the steep hill. I knew just where to place my feet and exactly which branches to grab hold of as momentum ran out and I'd swing myself up to the top. I could be down in a flash, no careful picking through the heather and Bilberry mounds. I would sit on one foot and stretch the other leg out in front, then shoot down the steep sandy slope made into a natural slide from years of children doing just the same.

As a child, to make was to build things, and in doing so, to build worlds, to know the landscape and its materials in a tactile way. It was about orientation and making a way in the world, or at least in our world. I was captivated by the transformative power of making, and I was nourished by the connection it gave me to the Natural World. It was a felt sense of understanding and being part of something bigger than my small self. I think this is still true.

From my childhood perspective, making was a way of meeting needs, to survive and know the world; fire, shelter, transformation, making was magical. As I grew, making became about making home - babies, food, safety. My creative materials focused on textiles and soft things, felting, stitching, sketching, bushcraft, woodturning, tanning, and beading.

As time went on, my making practice became more externalized as my children grew and we collectively interfaced more with the world outside our garden. I was interested in the idea of making as a developmental tool, the idea that we construct a self both consciously and unconsciously. Making became not just a personal tool for navigating the world but also a professional identity, an artist who makes things to communicate ideas and facilitate experiences in others.

In recent years, I've had the opportunity to work with some amazing people and interact with a wider creative sector encompassing design, research, and innovation as well as creative arts. I've had my mind open to ways of making that feel new and unfamiliar, and I've seen people and teams imagine together to bring into being things they could never create alone. I've been lucky to be part of projects with others and feel the joy of collective world-building again.

A raft of new skills and tools have been gathered along the way, and my personal ways of making have expanded and shifted. I've oscillated between my grounding in producing a tangible object or thing and applying creative thinking within the context of conversations, developing projects and imagining future possibilities with others.

Making now feels more about making things happen with others and also helping others who want to create in useful ways. That's where the magic is now; being part of a collective, just one of many interwoven strands of the rope.

My starting point is making; I see myself as a maker. But not a maker in the traditional sense. I don't work with materials and if anything, I get impatient and frustrated if my vision of an object doesn't translate through creating.

However, I have always seen myself as creative. When I was a child, I always had a book for drawing. If I wasn't drawing, I would be dancing, if not dancing I would be singing, if not singing I was making up shows with my cousins to later perform for my parents, granny and granda.

Looking back, I realise how lucky I was to have a family that would support any 'flavour of the month'. From Brownies to swimming and theatre group, to dance classes in any form available - I rate majorettes as one of my more refined choices (not).

Music, props, time, and imagination became the foundations for experiences of wonder in the close few streets in which we were given permission to be. From 'painting' the wall with water and making faces from clothes pegs to dressing up in our mums' shoes and annoying the neighbors with the clip-clopping, we were always making something out of nothing.

Sometimes we'd spend hours at the back of the flats, where we shouldn't have been, but that's where it was good for climbing. Walls were painted cream in efforts to look better but with the weather's wear and tear, looked even more abandoned. The wooden garages, surrounded by broken glass, which we were convinced housed motorbikes, family heirlooms and treasure. And the large stone boulders that yearned to be jumped on when on route to grannies, they made you feel 10 feet taller.

This patch of land was a world where we could built together, and it was experienced in a very physical way.

I remember the excitement of knowing we'd be venturing to the 'Linky Wood' for a picnic, which was situated only across the main road. We'd be tasked with looking for a four-leaf clover as we walked to get there and would always have our fingers crossed that someone had made a new tree swing by the river. My granny once stood in the middle of the Farmers field, arms wide, shouting 'I want to be a tree!'. I also lost a pound coin in that field that was never found, and I still look out for it to this day.

As a child, to make was to do things, to build worlds, encompassing place and people in a tactile way. It was about play and extending the possibilities of what was around us, and to be aware of and malleable in that space. I was captivated by the transformative power of making; a ball of wool could suddenly turn a living room into a spider's web. It was a sense of metamorphosis, a process without complete understanding or expectation. I think this is even more important today.

From my childhood perspective, making was a way of forming relationships and exploring who I was; stories, moving, talking, making was magical. As I grew, making became about making home - dogs, food, safety. My creative material became work... finding my way through the arts sector from study to employment saw me move across the country and back again.

As time went on, my making practice became more driven by context and individual ambition, including the dreaming up of a new organisation. I was invested in the idea of making as a developmental tool, the idea that we construct a self both consciously and unconsciously. Making became not just a professional identity but a tool for navigating the world, a creative who makes things happen to respond to our social environment and to facilitate that experience with and for others.

In recent years, I've had the opportunity to work with some amazing people and interact with a wider creative sector encompassing multiple art forms, as well as education and research. I've had my mind open to ways of making that feel new and unfamiliar, and I've seen people and teams imagine together to bring into being things they could never create alone. I've been lucky to be part of projects with others and feel the joy of collective world-building again.

A raft of new skills and tools have been gathered along the way, and my personal ways of making have expanded and shifted. I've oscillated between my grounding in applying creative thinking within conversations, developing projects, and imagining future possibilities to producing tangible things (though I'm no less impatient).

Making currently feels more relative to me as a term to describe my 'doing', from creating a print to team building. That's where the magic is now; being part of a collective, where everyone's tacitly and interpretation of making is valued and celebrated.

“There is no way in which to understand the world without first detecting it through the radar-net of our senses. [...] Our senses define the edge of consciousness, and because we are born explorers and questers after the unknown, we spend a lot of our Lives pacing that windswept perimeter”

‘A Natural History of the Senses’ Diane Ackerman

After a lifetime of fascination for tools and making and for a physical engagement with the material world, I would imagine that perhaps I would have settled on ‘my tools’ and ‘my materials’ by now. That hasn’t happened. I’m still too caught up in the magic of making.

When, as a child, I visited a local craft fair at our community centre and saw a man sitting with a block of wood in his hands, slowly transforming it into a dog, that was it. I was totally mesmerized - what is this magic?!

Very kindly, he gave me a block to take home, explaining it was lime and soft to carve, apparently. I’m lucky that I can’t remember a time when I didn’t have tools. They were always tools around, and from a young age, I had my own toolkit.

Because I showed an interest, I was given old tools from family friends. Saws, chisels, planes, clamps, knives. An old knife with the end chopped off was a good companion - tools equal magic; they make things happen.

The wood block becomes the dog - like turning straw into gold - though my dog never really emerged to the same degree as the one I had seen at the craft fair; still, I enjoyed the process and the possibility.

A list of some things I’ve made, in no particular order: A book, too many meals to count, parties, babies who now seem to be adults, websites, flower beds, a brick patio, slip cast stones from hand-dug clay, drawings, fabric wall hangings, quilts, musical instruments, natural dyes, a guided walk, collective poetry, a tiny woodland, many good compost heaps, large wooden sculptures, lots of wine, paintings, many sketches and prints, children’s illustrations, workshops, projects, programs of events, studio spaces, conversations, relationships, songs, paintings.

I’ve enjoyed playing with all manner of materials: wood, clay, felt, textiles, and natural dyeing with plant materials. I’ve dabbled in illustration, embroidery, casting, wood turning, tanning, sculpture, printmaking, drawing, painting, photography, digital illustration, bookmaking - I can’t seem to settle. But why would I want to when there are so many possibilities?

I sometimes berate myself for the breath of my experiments in making and admire those who master their chosen craft, but at the same time, I still feel drawn to expand even further what it means for me to be a maker.

After a lifetime of fascination of creating and making and for a physical engagement with the act of doing, I would imagine that perhaps I would have settled on ‘my craft’ and ‘my approach’ by now. That hasn’t happened. I am still too caught up in the magic of making.

When, as a child, I’d regularly be at my grannies, I’d watch her knit. One ball of wool would become a cardigan, the next some socks, the next a scarf. The needles would shape shift into back scratchers. One thing became many.

Very kindly, she gave me a cotton reel, some needles, and a ball of wool. She showed me how to start what she called ‘a catty’s tail’ and it introduced me to the process. I’m lucky I can’t remember a time when I wasn’t encouraged to play, try, or do.

Because I showed an interest, I was given other tools for creating from family and friends. Craft packs, magazines, notepads, books - things equal imagination; they make things happen.

The wool becomes the cardigan - like turning straw into gold - though my ‘catty’s tail’ never moved past its linear form, into the realm of patterns and things I saw in the living room, still, I enjoyed the process and possibility.

A list of some things I’ve made, in no particular order: A book, meals (badly), parties, curtains, websites, collages, a wooden remembrance piece, business plans, drawings, organisational logos, photo books, poems, songs, cakes (badly), lesson plans, timetables, learning resources, workshops, projects, programs of events, conversations, a musical, endless playlists, exercise classes, clothes, clothes designs, tattoo designs, prints, etchings, cocktails, signage, embroidery, friendships, laughter, connections.

I enjoyed playing with all manner of tools: wood, thread, digital software, templates, books, and lecture notes. I’ve dabbled in fiddle lessons, piano lessons, adult contemporary dance class, lino printing and etching, interior design and creative writing - I can’t seem to settle. But why would I want to when there are so many possibilities?

I sometimes berate myself for the breath of my experiments in making and admire those who master their chosen craft, but at the same time, I still feel drawn to expand even further what it means for me to be a maker.

“From our perspective [...] the entire terrain of knowledge is reconfigured. Instead of a territorial surface segmented into domains or fields of study, we have something more like a rope, wound from corresponding strands or lines of interest”

‘Making’ Tim Ingold

So where am I at now with making? I’ve had a few years of making in an expanded sense and often in, what has felt like, a less tangible or more ephemeral way than when I was in the studio each day. Still, the relationships, conversations, maps, writing, reporting, and project plans seem to have often yielded results. Projects have happened, and relationships have been built. I have felt useful, valued, and connected to a wider collective goal of making good stuff happen.

Being involved in larger-scale and community-based projects is a lovely experience of collaboratively making and a fantastic way to see how all the various creative skills of the individuals involved come together to make something happen. It’s amazing, and I love it!

Making in all its myriad of forms is a beautiful expression of being human. It is an essentially hopeful act, which is why it is so essential as a community-building tool. It’s a way of saying, “Here we are together; what can we all do? - Let’s make something good!”

While I feel the need from time to time for the grounding that comes from an individual practice rooted in physical making as a point of orientation amidst the complexities of collaboration, for me, I think it is about reconnecting with something which sustains me. I am nourished by physical contact with materials, and it helps me to remember and re-learn some fundamentals about creativity and also about collaboration.

There are some ways of knowing and learning that only emerge in the physical and spatial and there are some ways forward for me that can only be revealed through the constellation of shapes, colours and textures and in the experience of forming something new that is unfolding with its own nature. This description of something unfolding with its own nature is essentially a description of creativity and life unfolding and beautifully illustrates the worlds we build together through collaboration.

From time to time, I love to experience creativity through material, shape and colour. It doesn’t mean there’s any less creativity in the crafting of a project, the building of relationships, the making of connections that help to build communities and the construction of a spreadsheet. Working with others through the AIM collective, I see very clearly how much creativity there is in those for whom conversation is their medium or an Excel spreadsheet their tool of choice.

I love to play with words and digital tools, and also, at a certain point, they begin to feel thin, and I long to make something solid; that’s just me and where I have come from. So I’ll continue to explore making as a practice in all its tangible and ephemeral ways, and I’ll continue to be enchanted by new materials, ideas, tools and, most of all, people. At the moment, this looks like me wearing the hats of artist, researcher, coach, producer and sometimes facilitator. Ultimately, I think what I want to be is a maker of spaces where good things happen for people. And I want to do this with others who also want to do the same.

So as this particular project draws to a close, what have we made together? - a community of practice based on mutual support, respect and trust. A space to imagine and create for the benefit of our community and strong foundations, both a network and a safety net as we move forward.

I love exploring new ways of making, and I’m going to carry on doing it regardless; it seems it is what I do. I’m so grateful to have found myself amongst the gang of excellent fellow makers with such an eclectic array of tools on their belts and tricks up their sleeves. There is always so much to learn and always so many ways to make. Long may the magic continue!

So where am I at now with making? I’ve had a few years of making in an expanded sense and often in, what has felt like, a more tangible or more ephemeral way than just being at the laptop each day. Still, the relationships, conversations, maps, writing, reporting, and project plans seem to have often yielded results. Projects have happened, and relationships have been built. I have felt useful, valued, and connected to a wider collective goal of making good stuff happen.

Being involved in larger-scale and community-based projects is a lovely experience of collaboratively making and a fantastic way to see how all the various creative skills of the individuals involved come together to make something happen. It’s amazing, and I love it!

Making in all its myriad of forms is a beautiful expression of being human. It is an essentially hopeful act, which is why it is so essential as a community-building tool. It’s a way of saying, “Here we are together; what can we all do? - Let’s make something good!”

While I feel the need from time to time for the grounding that comes from an individual practice rooted in playing as a point of orientation amidst the complexities of collaboration, for me, I think it is about reconnecting with something which sustains me. I am nourished by doing something just for the sake of it, and it helps me to remember and re-learn some fundamentals about creativity and also about collaboration.

There are some ways of knowing and learning that only emerge through dialogue and through sharing and there are some ways forward for me that can only be revealed through the constellation of budgets, plans and mapping and in the experience of generating something new that is unfolding with its own nature. This description of something unfolding with its own nature is essentially a description of creativity and life unfolding and beautifully illustrates the worlds we build together through collaboration.

From time to time now, I love to experience creativity through material, shape and colour. This is new for me. I previously undervalued the creativity in the crafting of a project, the building of relationships, the making of connections that help to build communities and the construction of a spreadsheet. Working with others through the AIM collective, I see very clearly how creativity is applied in multiple guises, each needed. I also have a heightened respect for those that make in a traditional sense.

I love to play with materials, and also, at a certain point, they begin to feel thin, and I long to make a plan; that’s just me and where I have come from. So I’ll continue to explore making as a practice in all its intangible and lasting ways, and I’ll continue to be enchanted by new ideas, partnerships and, most of all, people. At the moment, this looks like me wearing the hats of director, researcher, spin instructor, celebrant, producer and sometimes, dare I say it, artist. Ultimately, I think what I want to be is a maker of spaces where good things happen for people. And I want to do this with others who also want to do the same.

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