EXPLORATIONS IN THE COMPARATIVE ANTHROPOLOGY OF THE LINE

Background

In this project I have attempted to forge a new understanding of the relation, in human life and experience, between movement, knowledge and description, by way of a comparative and historical anthropology of the line. The intellectual roots of the project lie in my earlier work on livelihood, dwelling and skill, in which I sought to establish a conception of the human being as a nexus of creative growth within an unfolding field of relationships. This process of growth is tantamount to a movement along a way of life. It is along such ways or paths, I argued, that lives are lived, skills developed and understandings grown.

These paths became the lines of my inquiry, in the pursuit of which I was led to explore three further themes: (1) the dynamics of pedestrian movement; (2) the linearity of writing, and (3) the creativity of practice.

1. With the exception of the march, walking is a practice of wayfaring rather than transport. Whereas the transported passenger is carried across from one predetermined point to another, the wayfarer improvises a passage as he or she goes along. In my research on walking I have shown how going along is itself a practice of thinking and knowing that cannot be reduced to the mechanics of getting from point to point. Locomotion and cognition are thus inseparable; and the ground is no mere platform for human activity but a domain in which the lives and minds of inhabitants are entangled. An ESRC award for a project entitled Culture from the ground: walking, movement and placemaking enabled me to take forward a programme of research on pedestrian movement. Building on a previous, ESRC-funded study that focused on recreational rambling and hillwalking in Scotland, this research has investigated the sociality of walking over a broader canvas, looking ethnographically at the ways in which practices of walking bind time and place in people’s experience, relationships and life-histories. The research has given rise to novel insights concerning the ways in which pedestrian movements mark the ground, are implicated in the formation of knowledge, and are bound up with personal narrative, that have fed directly into the Fellowship project.

2. My interest in the linearity of writing arose through an engagement with the work of the French archaeologist and anthropologist, André Leroi-Gourhan. In his

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2 RES-000-23-0312, 27 months, February 2004 to April 2006.
treatise on *Gesture and Speech*, Leroi-Gourhan argued that for as long as human beings have been talking and telling stories, they have also been drawing lines. These lines are traces left by the manual gestures that accompany the flow of spoken narrative. Leroi-Gourhan calls this kind of line-making ‘graphism’. Yet he contends that early graphism, embedded in contexts of narrative, was non-linear. Only with the advent of alphabetic writing was graphism ‘linearised’ to conform to the sequential organisation of the speech sounds it purported to represent. This begs the question of the meaning of linearity. In what sense were the continuous lines of early graphism non-linear? And how can a string of discrete letter forms be regarded as the epitome of the linear? In a series of six public lectures delivered in 2003 I proposed a distinction between two kinds of line: the *gestural trace* and the *point-to-point connector*, exemplified respectively by graphism and by the line of print. The distinction between the trace and the connector, as modalities of description, parallels that between wayfaring and transport, as modalities of movement. In the Fellowship research I have further explored this parallel.

3. There is a tendency in modern societies to equate creation with innovation. Thus the creative essence of a work of art is attributed to the novel conception of the artist, or that of a building to the architect’s innovative design. Influenced by the philosophy of Henri Bergson, and taking up ideas I had begun to explore in a much earlier volume, I have argued that this understanding denies the creativity of the environmentally situated and perceptually engaged practices through which real forms – such as of works of art or buildings – are generated and sustained. To recover this creativity it is necessary to focus not on the novelty of design but on the generative potential of everyday, improvisatory performance. Thus walking, for example, can be a practice of architecture, and manual gesture a practice of art. Research on the creativity of practice was initiated through a project funded by the (then) Arts and Humanities Research Board, entitled *Learning is understanding in practice: exploring the interrelations between perception, creativity and skill*. Among the outcomes were a conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists (ASA), held in Aberdeen in April 2005, on *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, and an exhibition of work by artists, architects and anthropologists, entitled *Fieldnotes and Sketchbooks*, held at Aberdeen Art Gallery, April to June 2005.

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*These were the Rhind Lectures, sponsored by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, and delivered at the Royal Museum of Scotland in May 2003.*


*36 months, July 2002 to June 2005. The project was carried out in collaboration between the Department of Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen and the School of Fine Art at the University of Dundee. The project involved an ethnographic study of the knowledge practices of fine art, conducted among students at Dundee University, complemented by an Aberdeen-based study of the applicability of studio-based approaches in fine art to teaching and learning in anthropology. A context for this latter study was furnished by a course (*The 4 As: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, see below) which I first presented to advanced undergraduate students in spring 2004.*

Objectives

The objectives of the Fellowship research, as stated in the original application, were as follows:

1. To forge a new approach to understanding the relation between movement, knowledge and description, by way of a comparative and historical anthropology of the line.
2. To explore the connections between anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture as ways of understanding and shaping the environment.
3. To further build and strengthen research capacity in the field of *Culture, creativity and perception*, with particular reference to walking, movement and placemaking and the relations between perception, creativity and skill.
4. To establish an interdisciplinary and inter-institutional programme of postgraduate training and research in art, architecture and anthropology.

Objective 1

During the first year of the Fellowship I completed a book, *Lines: A Brief History*, based on the 2003 series of Rhind Lectures. The book, published by Routledge in May 2007, is a prolegomena to the anthropological study of the line, and sets out a general theory of how the line, in the course of its history, was shorn of the movement that gave rise to it, and reduced to a series of connected points. I show how the transition from the gestural trace to the point-to-point connector has affected travel and transport, the art of writing, the understanding of place and environment, and conceptions of history, genealogy and cultural continuity. The research I have conducted in the remaining two years of the Fellowship has contributed to a follow-up volume with the working title *Lines 2*. A central theme is the relationship between the ways along which living beings move and grow, and the fluxes of the medium through which this growth occurs, or in short, between lines and the weather. My paper ‘Footprints through the weather world’, completed in August 2007, sets out the overall approach. A brief synopsis of the argument of the book is outlined below (see ‘Results’). Following the success of *Lines*, Routledge is keen to publish its sequel.

Objective 2

In the spring semester of 2006 and again in 2008, I taught an advanced undergraduate course on *The 4 As: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*. The course included practical sessions in which could test my ideas experimentally in group work, for example through exercises with found objects and materials, kite-flying, outdoor walking and landscape perception, weaving, felt- and string-making and knotting, drawing, movement notation and modelling. I have used the lectures and coursework as a basis on which to write a book with the same title. Though I was unable to complete the book within the Fellowship period, drafts of all but two of the twelve chapters are finished, and many have been presented in seminars and conferences. A complete manuscript should be ready for submission to Routledge by April 2009. An outline of the book is presented below (see ‘Results’).

Objective 3

I have completed editorial work on two volumes. The first is based on papers presented at the 2005 ASA conference on *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*. Submitted in August

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10 Listed as publication 12 in ‘Outputs’. The paper is also attached to this report as a nominated output.
11 Some of these exercises are described in publication 15.
2006, the volume (co-edited with Elizabeth Hallam) was published by Berg in April 2007. The second is based on papers presented at the September 2005 workshop on walking and anthropology (part of the ESRC-funded project, Culture from the ground), co-convened in Aberdeen by myself and Jo Lee Vergunst. Editorial work on the volume was completed in September 2007. Entitled Ways of Walking: Ethnography and Practice on Foot, the volume was published by Ashgate in July 2008, as the first in a new series of Anthropological Studies in Creativity and Perception which Ashgate has agreed to publish under my general editorship.

I expect to complete editorial work on a further volume for the Ashgate series, entitled Anthropology between art and architecture and including contributions from former PhD students, within the next 6 months. I am also planning a collection of my own essays written over the five-year period 2003 to 2008. This will be called The entanglements of life: essays on movement, knowledge and description, and will be published by Routledge as a sequel to my 2000 collection The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill. All the essays are now written. Most are already published as journal articles or chapters in conference volumes, but will be revised for this new collection.

A number of project proposals were developed during the Fellowship period that would further strengthen research capacity in the field of Culture, Creativity and Perception. These are detailed below (see ‘Future Research Priorities’).

Objective 4
Art, architecture and anthropology share a common aim in seeking to understand how people perceive and shape the world around them through practices of designing, making, building and inhabiting. However, they have traditionally pursued this aim by different means, including various forms of arts practice, architectural design, ethnographic writing and film. There is scope for combining these means across the entire interdisciplinary terrain, leading to innovative forms of research-led engagement. To this end I convened a series of five one-day workshops on Art, Architecture and Anthropology during the Fellowship period, with a view to laying the foundations for a cross-institutional research and graduate programme in this field. Through the workshops, averaging 25 participants, we have established an active network of scholars, principally from the Universities of Aberdeen, Dundee, Edinburgh and Strathclyde, along with Edinburgh College of Art, Glasgow School of Art and Gray’s School of Art (Robert Gordons University), but with additional participants from elsewhere in the UK and Europe. The workshops series concluded with the establishment of a Working Party to take forward a proposal to set up a Scottish Centre for Research in Art, Architecture and Anthropology, including an embedded master’s programme. We are currently exploring funding opportunities to develop the Centre.

Methods
This research has been mainly library-based and highly interdisciplinary, drawing on literature from social and cultural anthropology, human geography, classical archaeology, developmental and evolutionary biology, cognitive and developmental psychology, phenomenology, the philosophies of art, music and literature, medieval history, the history of art, science studies and material culture studies. In my work on the 4As I have additionally engaged with work in fine art, architecture and prehistoric archaeology. I have developed my ideas through correspondence and dialogue with a wide range of
scholars in all these fields, as well as through working with students taking my 4As classes.

**Results**

Below I present brief outlines of the two principal volumes to emerge from the Fellowship research: *Lines 2* and *The 4 As*.

**Lines 2**

Arguing that the inhabited world is populated not by *objects* but by *things*, each considered as a particular gathering of the threads of life, I develop the notion of the *environment without objects* (EWO). The EWO is not a material world but a *world of materials*, and a focus on life-processes requires us to follow these materials as they flow, mix and mutate. Reacting against theories of materiality that reduce life to agency and things to objects, I show that to understand life as a creative process is to think of creativity in terms not of *innovation* but of *improvisation*. To improvise is to follow the ways of the world as they unfold, rather than to connect up, in reverse, a series of points already traversed. These ways, then, do not comprise a *network* of interconnected points but a *meshwork* of interwoven lines of growth. The EWO, finally, is an immense tangle of such life-lines and ecology is the study of these lines.

**The 4 As**

This book is in four parts. In the first part, on *Design and Form* (including chapters on *Making*, *Building* and *Weaving*) I challenge the ‘hylomorphic’ view of making as the imposition of form on matter, and argue that form is emergent within fields of forces set up through the engagements of practitioners and materials. In the second part, on *Gathering Together* (with chapters on *Materials*, *Things* and *Movements*), I argue that to grasp the generative and rhythmic dynamic of a world in formation, we need to follow the flows of materials that give rise to things rather than focusing, as is conventional in studies of material culture, on the materiality of objects. The third part, on *Action and Perception* (including chapters on *Skill*, *Gesture* and *Sense*) considers the humanity of the hand, as a compendium of capacities of movement and feeling developed through past practice, and what it means to sense the world through the skilled activities of touching, looking and listening. The final part on *Observation and Description* (with chapters on *Line*, *Drawing* and *Notation*) focuses on the question of why the drawn line, so central to the disciplines of art, architecture and archaeology, has been largely eliminated from anthropology, and proposes a *graphic anthropology* that would embrace all forms of line-making, from handwriting to the drawn sketch, as well as taking advantage of the full range of notational systems available in other disciplines.

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12 This argument is spelled out in publication 11 (see ‘Outputs’). The paper is also attached to this report as a nominated output.
13 I present a critique of material culture studies in publication 8.
Activities

Conferences

The following papers arising from the Fellowship research have been presented by invitation at national and international conferences:

2005 ‘Materials against materiality’ (published as 7); Seminar on Materiality in society and culture, University of Oslo, November 2005.
2006 ‘Earth, sky, wind and weather’ (published as 6); Research Seminar and Doctoral Training Course on Landscapes and liminality, Kevo Research Station, University of Turku, Finland, January 2006.
2006 ‘Walking the plank: meditations on a process of skill’ (published as 12); Research Seminar on Technology and its social forms, University of Bergen, March 2006.
2006 ‘Against soundscape’ (published as 20); Conference on Sound and anthropology, University of St Andrews, June 2006.
2006 ‘The craft of anthropology’; Workshop on Migratory practices: exchanges between anthropology, art, craft and design, Manchester Metropolitan University, September 2006.
2006 Discussant’s comment (published as 16); Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference, session on Overcoming the modern invention of material culture, University of Exeter, December 2006.
2007 ‘Making, knowing, telling’; Conference on Skilled practice: bridging the gap between use and design, Mads Clausen Institute for Product Innovation, University of Southern Denmark at Sondeborg, March 2007.
2007 ‘The wedge and the knot: hammering and stitching the face of nature’ (to be published as 26); Conference on Nature, space and the sacred: transdisciplinary perspectives, University of Bamberg, Germany, May 2007.
2007 ‘Footprints through the weather world: walking, breathing, knowing’ (to be published as 11); Workshop on The transmission of knowledge, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, September 2007.
2007 ‘Against space: place, movement, knowledge’ (to be published 24); Workshop on The space of democracy and the democracy of space, University of Newcastle, October 2007.
2007 ‘Why a meeting between art and anthropology should not be about images, objects and embodiment but about light, materials and growth’; Symposium on Image as Embodiment: Cross-disciplinary perspectives, Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia, November 2007.
2008 ‘The environment as fluid space’. Workshop on *Environmental aesthetics and ethics*, Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities, University of Edinburgh, January 2008

2008 ‘Vision is life in the light’. Symposium on *Perspectives on the convergence of arts practice and bioscience*, Dundee Contemporary Arts and University of Dundee, February 2008

2008 ‘Point, line, counterpoint: from environment to fluid space’ (published as 19); IPSEN Foundation Conference, *Neurobiology of the “Umwelt”: How living beings perceive the world*, Paris, February 2008

2008 ‘Environments for life: turning the world outside-in’. Institute for Cultural Research seminar on *Humans and nature: how we shape and are shaped by our environment*, Royal Institute of British Architects, London, February 2008


**Lectures**

The following papers arising from the Fellowship research have been presented by invitation as *special lectures*:

2006 ‘Drawing together: inscriptive convergences between anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture’, Invited lecture, Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley, February 2006; also presented as Humanities Research Institute Lecture, University of Sheffield, October 2006.


2007 ‘Dots and lines: thinking about descent in biology and culture’ (published as Chapter 4 of 1); Darwin Lecture, Institute of Advanced Study in the Humanities, University of Durham, February 2007

2007 ‘Anthropology is not ethnography’ (published as 8); Radcliffe-Brown Memorial Lecture, British Academy, London and University of Edinburgh, March 2007

2008 ‘Footprints through the weather world: walking, breathing, knowing’ (to be published as 11); Invited lecture, Department of Anthropology, University of Toronto, March 2008

2008 ‘Sea-ing the land, or, a maritime theory of landscape perception’; Society of Antiquaries of Scotland, Buchan Lecture (presented as keynote address at the conference on Maritime Societies of the Viking and Medieval World, Kirkwall, Orkney), June 2008

Workshops series

A series of five one-day workshops was organized in Aberdeen, as part of the Fellowship project, to explore the relations between Art, Architecture and Anthropology.

Sources of creativity, 12 June 2006
Presentations by:
Tim Ingold (University of Aberdeen)
Jacob Buur (University of Southern Denmark at Sondeborg)
Ray Lucas (University of Edinburgh)
Glen Taylor (Glasgow School of Art)
Lesley McFadyen (University of Leicester)
Wendy Gunn (University of Southern Denmark at Sondeborg)

Writing, drawing and inscription, 8 January 2007
Presentations by:
Murdo Macdonald (University of Dundee)
Mike Anusas (University of Strathclyde)
Raymond Monelle (University of Edinburgh)
Kevin Miller (University of Strathclyde)
The presentations were followed by a general discussion focusing on the themes of the AHRC strategic programme Beyond Text: Sounds, Voices, Images, Objects

The senses and their interrelations, 18 June 2007
Presentations by:
Tim Ingold (University of Aberdeen)
Stephanie Bunn (University of St Andrews)
Ray Lucas (Strathclyde University)
Stephen Cairns (University of Edinburgh)
Fiona Candy (University of Central Lancashire)

Towards a curriculum, 17 March 2008
The objective of this workshop was to design a curriculum for a proposed, cross-institutional Master’s programme on Art, Architecture and Anthropology. The day was devoted entirely to discussion, based on notes submitted in advance by participants. For a part of the day, a group of final-year undergraduate students taking my course on The 4As joined the workshop, in order to contribute a student perspective to the discussion.

Setting up a new Centre, 1 September 2008
This was a small concluding meeting to discuss a proposal for setting up a Scottish Centre for Research in Art, Architecture and Anthropology.
**Teaching and supervision**

Around 16 Senior Honours students in Anthropology took my Level 4 course on *The 4 As* in the spring semesters of 2006 and 2008.

I have continued to (co)supervise research students. Seven students completed their doctorates under my supervision during the Fellowship period. I am still supervising another eleven.

**Other related activities**

I was involved in discussions leading up to the formulation of the AHRC strategic research programme *Beyond Text: Sounds, Voices, Images, Objects*, and have been a member of the Programme Steering Committee from 2007 onwards.

I have been a member of the Evaluation Committee for the European Science Foundation programme BOREAS (*Histories from the North: Environments, Movements, Narrative*) since 2005.

I have assisted in a mentorship capacity with the preparation of three research proposals submitted for external funding:

J. Vergunst, *Learning outdoor access: an ethnography of landscape, politics and movement in Scotland and Sweden* (ESRC First Grant scheme, shortlisted, A-rated but not funded)

M. Anusas, *Connecting environments: everyday artefact experiences* (ESRC First Grant scheme, shortlisted, A-rated but not funded)

E. Ferraro, *Skilled practice, apprenticeship and anthropological inquiry: a comparative ethnography of silversmithing in Ecuador and in Scotland* (ESRC Fellowship application, resubmission, A-rated but not funded)

**Outputs**

The following publications have arisen specifically from research conducted under the Fellowship:

**Books**


**Journal articles (peer reviewed)**

Chapters in books

Impacts

My book *Lines: A Brief History* is already having an impact across a wide range of academic fields. A measure of its influence is its selection by *Choice* magazine as an ‘outstanding academic book of the year’ for 2008. The book has proved to be of particular interest to a several contemporary environmental artists, leading to ongoing collaborations including the following:

- With the artist Elizabeth Ogilvie, based at Kinghorn, Fife, I have established a collaboration between staff and postgraduate students in Anthropology at the University of Aberdeen, and Ogilvie’s *Art, Space, Nature* group at Edinburgh College of Art, leading to joint workshops in October 2008 (Aberdeen) and January 2009 (Edinburgh) in preparation for joint fieldwork in Greenland for Ogilvie’s *Polar Project* in May 2009.

- Collaboration with Anne Douglas and her colleagues at Gray’s School of Art (Robert Gordons University, Aberdeen) has led to a series of practical workshops, being held through 2008-09 and principally organised by postgraduate research students in the Department of Anthropology, University of Aberdeen, on the potential of drawing as a research tool.

- Along with colleagues in the Department of Anthropology I am collaborating with the Dundee-based artists Matthew Dalziel and Louise Scullion in preparing a research proposal for AHRC funding on the potential of artistic practice to change perceptions of ecological issues.

- I am collaborating with the London-based artist Odette England in a photographic project entitled *Fault*, which was directly inspired by *Lines*. The project investigates the relations between land borders, cultural boundaries, natural fissures and written words.

- I am collaborating with the Italian artists Andrea Caretto and Rafaella Spagna, both based in Turin, on a book project including contributions from anthropologists, artists and philosophers.

Future Research Priorities

Four lines of further research have arisen from the Fellowship, for all of which I have applied, or will be applying, for funding:

- My research on wayfaring and transport led me to conclude that neither ever appears in a pure form, but that they are always combined. How this combination works in practice can only be established through comparative,
empirical research. With colleagues in the Department of Anthropology at Aberdeen I designed a project designed to do just this. Entitled *Roads and lives: movement, perception, knowledge, time*, a proposal was submitted to ESRC in May 2008, and the project would have commenced in January 2009. Though the reviewers were unanimous in their enthusiasm for the project, it was not funded. This setback has been hugely frustrating. We are currently exploring alternative funding sources.

- Linking my work on materials, skill, gesture and drawing with my development of the notion of environment as a meshwork of entangled lines of growth, I proposed a project of empirical research that would compare fields of craft practice (boat-building, weaving, painting) in contrasting environments in Norway and Scotland. The proposal, entitled *Crafting relations: skills, materials, environments* was submitted to AHRC in November 2007, with a start date of October 2008. Though well reviewed and A-rated, the project was not funded. Since the nominated RA for the project has now found employment elsewhere, I have no plans to resubmit.

- To further explore the significance and potential of drawing for anthropology, I sought AHRC funding under the strategic programme ‘Beyond text’ for a one-year (2008-09) series of three workshops entitled *Redrawing anthropology: materials, movements, lines*. Following the failure of this application I reworked the proposal as a single 3-day conference, and successfully applied for funding from the British Academy. The conference will be held in Aberdeen in June 2009. It will include an exhibition of students’ work arising from the collaborative drawing workshops with Gray’s School of Art (see ‘Impacts’, above). A volume of papers from the conference will be published in the Ashgate series, *Anthropological Studies of Creativity and Perception*.

- One of the principal outcomes of my research on the 4 A’s has been to replace the hylomorphic model of the creation of things with an ontology that assigns primacy to forces and materials. Further research is needed to fully work out the implications of this challenge. To this end, I applied in May 2008 for a Leverhulme Major Research Fellowship, for a project entitled *Bringing things to life: creative entanglements in a world of materials*. The project would have been scheduled to begin in October 2009. However, due to my subsequent appointment as Head of the School of Social Science at the University of Aberdeen for the three years 2008-2011, I have had to withdraw the application, and plan to submit it again in two years’ time.

**Ethics**

No special ethical considerations have arisen in the course of the research.

**Confidentiality**

This report makes reference to confidential material.