TO INSTRUCT

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Foreword

I think back to a dance workshop held in 2019 with two professional dancers guiding us, a large group of multidisciplinary MA students. We were encouraged to move our bodies and 'let ourselves go'. Not one person wanted to move. Very few people had an instinctive feeling to follow where their bodies took them. The workshop felt stilted and awkward, too many glances over shoulders, uncertain sniggers and smirks at friends. In comparison, half-way through the session they gave us a set of clear yet simple instructions that meant we behaved in a certain way. Whilst this experience still held moments of painful shyness, I no longer felt inhibited by my body. I was entering into a physical act with a level of reassurance. Firstly, everyone else around me was doing the same action; we were following the same instruction. Secondly, the way my body reacted became less of my responsibility; if I moved in a certain way, it wasn't my fault. How can this experience of dancing make me think about the process of working with a physical handcraft? In this way I have begun to see instructions as an integral part of a larger creative process. They provide me admission into, and a guide of, a new physical experience and way of thinking.

Instructions are freeing, enlivening, uplifting, democratizing and productive. Instructions lead to innovative thought, creative output, autonomy and confidence. Instructions allow us to truly feel what a practical process feels like; an important component of creativity. I would argue it is hard to feel creative in any field without first an understanding of the materials you are working with be it flour and eggs, needle and thread, your body and the beat. Instructions allow access into the unknown, permission to experience, entry into something previously undiscovered.

Instructions form the basis of learning. From verbal warnings, mimicry and modelling, we are given cues continually since birth to guide our understanding of the world around us. If we look at the idea of instructions as a form of model, then we might better understand how instructions can form an integral part of the development of agency and identity within children. As Richard Sennett discusses: "A model is a proposal rather than a command. Its excellence can stimulate us, not to imitate, but to innovate"[1]. I want to examine this structure of learning, a component so familiar to human nature that it can feel intuitive, almost automatic. I want to break down what we think of as instructions and see how intertwined it is through pedagogy, reflecting on my creative practice as a textile designer and maker.

[1] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). 101

There is conversation within art and design education about the 'creative process' and the seemingly mystical quality of it. I wouldn't want to devalue the magic or tangible excitement that exists when working in a creative way, but I would in some way argue the creative process is indeed a set of instructions you can tap into. Whether it is instructions to follow a preexisting set of rules to make a specific outcome, or instructions to abandon what we know and take a leap of faith, the act of prescribing or following instructions is intrinsic to what this creative process actually is. I don't believe this comes from any higher force or greater body that understands creativity more than others, but it does come from experience; the knowledge you have to fail, that rules are there to be broken, as artist and educator Leslie Hirst surmises: "…making is not about the end – it is about the process"[2]. Instructions allow the user, student or maker to be present in the process; the act of following instructions step by step can remove decisions and autonomy, centering process and experience at the heart of making.

Sometimes making feels entirely engrained in my body, like an unspoken sense of process, unconscious bodily actions that perform themselves when presented in the right situation. Tim Ingold talks of the feeling of familiarising yourself with the knowing of things: "To know things you have to grow into them…The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of knowledge"[3]. This is a feeling that underpins much of my own practice, from the frustration and alienation of a making process, through to the embodiment of it. The notion of learning through doing highlights the importance of the senses in relation to materials[4] and as a textile designer and maker, I am constantly learning through action; trial and error is part of my technical make-up, tacit understanding is a language I take for granted. In lots of ways this is why I am so intrigued by skill, learning, and process; it feels like something magical happens in that space between learnt skill and agency of experience.

It only feels right for me to center this research around my own textile practice, using the field of patchwork quilting as a lens to interrogate the role of instructions. When I began quilting, I found myself at the start of an unknown journey, out of my depth and grappling at new language and technique. I was hopping from one YouTube video to the next, posting messages on blogs and panic-asking questions to any quilter I could pin down. I want to return to that moment of learning,

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[2] Leslie Hirst, 'Groundwork' in *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, ed. by Ma Alessandra L. Hermano and Rosanne Somerson (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013).
[3] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 1.
[4] Stefano Parisi, Valentina Rognoli, and Marieke Sonneveld, 'Material Tinkering. An Inspirational Approach for Experiential Learning and Envisioning in Product Design Education', *Design Journal*, 20 (2017), S1167–84 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1353059>.

to interrogate what happens in the process of 'becoming' a quilter and the way I relate to creativity. Transcribing and selecting instructions found in videos for 'Improv' (improvised) quilting provide a starting point, a verbal or visual cue to prompt me to make. I chose to work with improv quilting as a specific notion as in itself there is an interesting contradiction of planned instruction and free-wheeling creative expression. Improv quilting works on the basis that it is improvised, unplanned and unexpected (see figure 1).

Figure 1. Amy Tidmarsh, improv exercises, 2020

TO INSTRUCT: *within quilt-making and visual arts*

How do instructions manifest themselves within the fields of the visual arts and specifically quilt-making? Are instructions there to impart knowledge yet encourage freedom of expression or do they assert cultural authority and encourage appreciation of traditional craft? Sennett states: "expressive directions connect technical craft to the imagination"[5] and as a maker I would argue instructions do indeed sit at a midpoint between the proficiency of skill and the potential of curiosity.

Reflecting on my initial entry into the quilting community I was dismayed to see how much of a reliance it had on instructional kits where you could, step-by-step, recreate quilts to exacting standards. My eyes travelled over blogs and social media posts, swamped with seemingly generic designs, meticulously crafted yet with very little sense of personality, or as I deemed it at the time 'creativity': "making a finished quilt under the eye of even the most well-meaning teacher can result

[5] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). p. 193

in derivative work, now considered the bane of the contemporary studio-quilt community."[6] The idea that making a derivative quilt isn't valuable feels naïve and short-sighted now I reflect on this feeling. I have grown in appreciation as to how these instructions are a form of creative liberation. In a discussion with quilter Chris English, we became focussed on why people sew and follow quilt patterns; how can you measure creativity when following step by step instructions? Whilst I argued the physical act of making is in itself a creative process, Chris felt the creativity came through "putting stuff together…working with your hands in a practical way"[7] also drawing on the notion of motivation, and how this in itself is a way of measuring creativity. Chris discussed that his enthusiasm and creativity came from the fact quilting was separate to his daily job, a theory supported by Stephen Knott in the argument that more exciting work comes from those who don't need to do it out of necessity, but rather from a place of pure enjoyment[8].

Who am I to devalue the skill, time, effort and emotional investment put into a quilt just because the maker has followed an existing design? Why is the quilt-maker who reproduces a quilt any less creative than the designer who puts the pattern together in the first place? You could argue whilst there may be skill, there is a lack of creativity in the studio assistant who follows Bridget Riley's instructions (see figure 2) and repaints her work on a gallery wall, but what difference is this between a quilter who follows a quilt pattern like gospel? Do we even think of the person who paints on behalf of Riley? Or is this a comment about art, artist, labour and ownership? The quilter who follows the instructions and constructs a quilt in line with a set design executes ownership in the physical act of making; with Riley, the execution is synonymous with the artist herself and the studio assistant is forgotten

[6] Sandra Sider, 'Educating the Quilt Artist', *Fiberarts*, 34.2 (2007), 42–45. p. 2.
[7] Author interview with Chris English, quilter, 15/06/2020
[8] Knott, *Amateur Craft: History and Theory* (London [etc.: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015). p. xiii

Figure 2. Bridget Riley, Hayward Gallery, London, 23 October 2019 - 26 January 2020

TO INSTRUCT: *material intelligence*

Instructions form a route into understanding materials more wholly. By reducing distractions found in process and output, instructions allow the maker to become more familiar to the material at hand. This becomes in part of having respect for material, and in turn, developing intelligence that allows the maker to think more deeply about the its structure, colour, weight and form. This is an idea largely supported by Sampson in wearing as an act of research: "The manifestations of this knowledge are dual, both the marks made through wearing (both on the garment and on my body) and the knowledge within my body, or the memory of sensation"[9]. There is a cross-over with making in this sense: knowledge of machinery, pre-existing technical understanding, combined with material and sensory knowledge. It became a way to understand the inherent qualities of a material or process (see figure 3 and 4), and to see these qualities clearly without predetermined ideas.

Figure 3. Amy Tidmarsh, Fabrics organised by colour, 2020

[9] Ellen Sampson, 'Entanglement, Affect and Experience: Walking and Wearing (Shoes) as Experimental Research Methodology', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 5.1 (2018), 55–76 <https://doi.org/10.1386/infs.5.1.55_1>. p. 3.

Tim Ingold speaks of making as a "participant in amongst a world of active materials."[10] which ignites the potential practical instructions can have. With this idea of material intelligence comes the practical considerations of technical skill. Through instruction you can learn that certain materials won't physically work in a sewing machine, but it makes sense to absorb what you know from the instruction and synthesize with your own experience. Looking at instruction as a form of tool helps investigate what happens at the crux of making in the context of practical skills: "in this sense skill is implicated in the processes that emerge at the interfaces between materials, the hand and tools."[11]

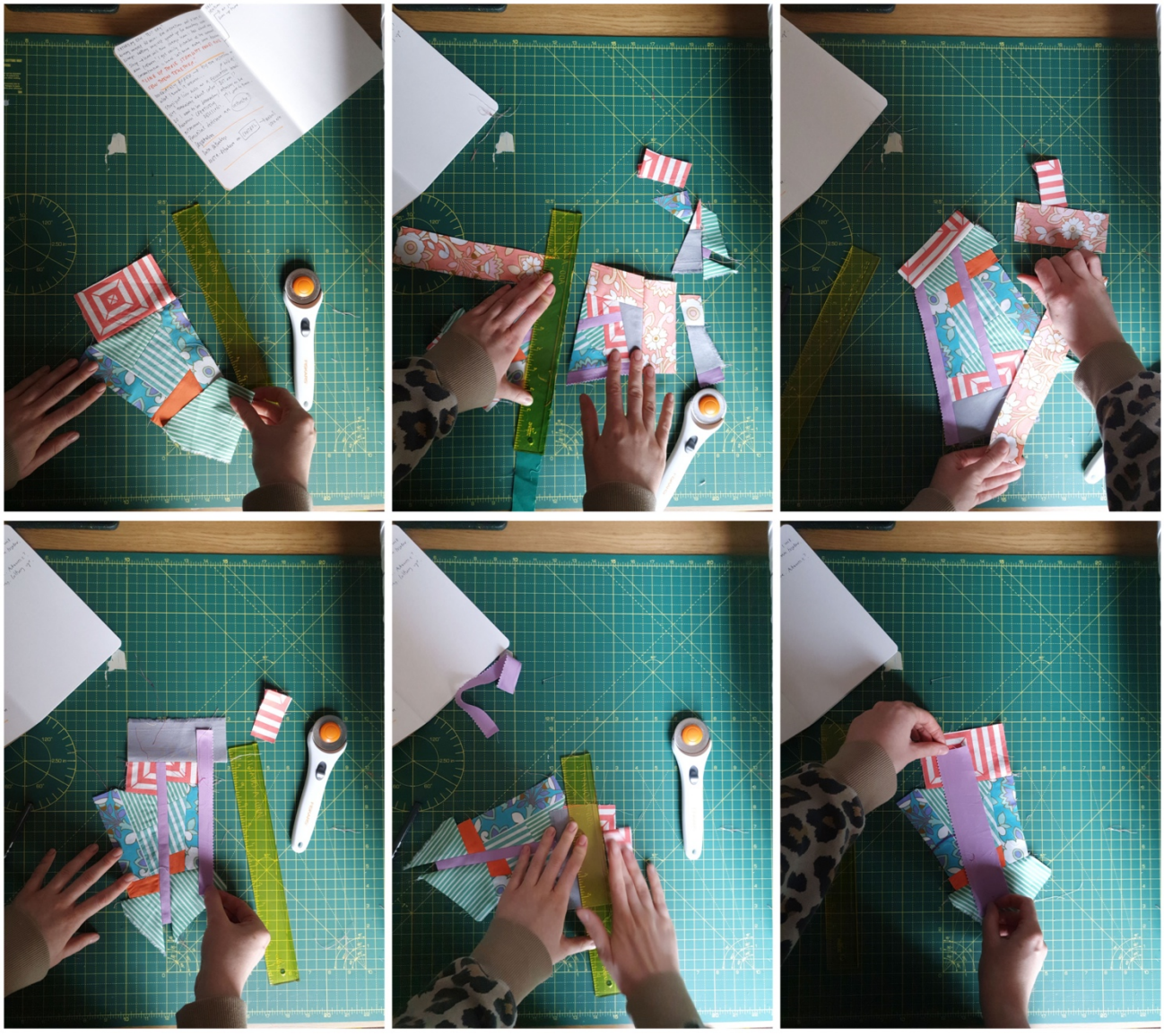

Figure 4. Amy Tidmarsh, #2 - 23/05/20, 2020

[10] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013). p. 21
[11] Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette, *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, 2015. p. 7

I found myself becoming increasingly more aware of the relationship of the material and its interaction via instruction. Through this hyper awareness of process and material: "… sensitized responses to materials can allow the material, rather than the maker, to lead"[12]. I really enjoyed the lack of autonomy that comes with instructions, a strange relief that materials and processes will somehow work their way together, skill or no skill. Allowing my material intelligence to heighten through the process of following instruction gave me greater confidence in the potential of my work. I was drawn to an unspoken analogue intelligence that bypassed feelings of technology, the idea that materials themselves hold an innate quality that might dictate the next step. The very nature of using scrap materials meant I was embracing a personal history connected in the memories of these fabrics. By working with them in such a physical yet informal way, I was playing, which in turn "emphasizes imperfect, organic, and rough surfaces, activating a process of humanisation of materials, making them honest, expressive and vulnerable."[13]

Chris English approaches material intelligence with a blasé, almost punk approach, willing to take risks and see what happens. There isn't much planning; he mostly trusts his material instincts when it comes to fabric and colour. What really struck me with Chris's approach was the innate confidence he had in his work, shown in his application of colour and pattern, but also in his instinctive decision-making process (see figure 5). The nature of improv means decisions made at one stage can sometimes be obsolete; is it the knowledge that each individual stage cutting and sewing might be lost by the addition of the next stage; there is no sense in worrying needlessly about where to place one piece of fabric; just get on with it.

Figure 5. Chris English, improv quilt, 2017

[12] Leslie Hirst, 'Groundwork' in *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, ed. by Ma Alessandra L. Hermano and Rosanne Somerson (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013). p. 25.
[13] Stefano Parisi, Valentina Rognoli, and Marieke Sonneveld, 'Material Tinkering. An Inspirational Approach for Experiential Learning and Envisioning in Product Design Education', *Design Journal*, 20 (2017), S1167–84 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14606925.2017.1353059>.

TO INSTRUCT: *correctly*

When considering the connection between instruction and practical skill, it is worth considering what we consider to be the 'right' set of instructions. The author or source that constructs the directions has the power to shape the skills learnt and how the learner executes them. Within handcraft and practical technique, there is a history of the master and the apprentice, the idea you learn precision and accuracy not only from the time invested in the physical act of making, but equally skill inherited from the direction and proximity of the teacher. In Tehrani and Riede's exploration of pedagogy and archaeology, it was surmised, "craft learning does not occur simply through observation and practice but is typically directed by an experienced and accomplished tutor"[14]. This comparison of proficiency rises to the surface when accuracy or perfection is scrutinized, leading to the notion that there is a 'correct' way of executing these directions. Whilst this offers a constructive framework in which to place practical and cultural knowledge, it does not necessarily allow room for the imaginative or idiosyncratic approach to skills that can arise through mistakes, misunderstanding or differing interpretation. It is commonly expressed within art and design education that mistakes or errors are an integral part of learning[15], supported by the notion of play and freedom to experiment, as discussed in Tim Brown's lecture on the Tales of Creativity and Play[16]. Innovation and divergent thinking are often the outcomes of such endeavours, key components when we think of when working towards a definition of creativity. However, in some ways, could we argue instructions are the antithesis of play? And if so, what role (if any) do they play in the broader argument about the origins and evolution of creativity.

Instructions bring with them an inherent sense or authority, a voice dictating the true way of executing skills or actions, but what happens when we arrive at a skillset having taken an alternative path? When referencing the idea of a skill equating 'cultural authority' within material disciplines, Glenn Adamson presents the idea that working without the skill can confront this authority[17]. By resisting traditional means of learning material skills within a craft perspective, the value and legitimacy can begin to be questioned. Even if we are to break rules, do we still need

[14] Jamshid J. Tehrani and Felix Riede, 'Towards an Archaeology of Pedagogy: Learning, Teaching and the Generation of Material Culture Traditions', *World Archaeology*, 40.3 (2008), 316–31 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438240802261267>. p. 325.
[15] Shaunna Smith and Danah Henriksen, 'Fail Again, Fail Better: Embracing Failure as a Paradigm for Creative Learning in the Arts', *Art Education*, 69.2 (2016), 5–11 <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043125.2016.1141644>. p. 7.
[16] Tim Brown, *Tales of Creativity and Play* <https://www.ted.com/talks/tim_brown_tales_of_creativity_and_play> [accessed 14 December 2019].
[17] Glenn Adamson, *Thinking through Craft* (London ; New York: Bloomsbury, 2013). p. 78.

some sense of objective standards? The quilters of Gee's Bend Alabama made quilts without the influence or validation of traditionally trained fine art appreciation (see figure 6). If work is made without the influence of a widely accepted culture, yet still presides to be well composed from the perspective of formal visual qualities, what does this say about our need for objective standards? Should these standards come from within ourselves, or our immediate community?

Reflections within the community of Wilcox Country Alabama lay the validation at the feet of the man who 'discovered' the quilts, implying there is a hierarchy of creative understanding which allowed this man, a relative outsider to the community, to come in and see the quilts for the pieces of art they now have been recognised as. Dr Alvia Wardlaw (curator of the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston) states: "the quilts reflect the history of that area and of this country in their making and it asks all of us about genius, and where does it reside."[18] There something exciting about approaching a new skillset without the cultural authority that defines it, which seems to describe the Gee's Bend quiltmakers more broadly. I would argue the process of breaking tradition, becoming more autonomous with practical decisions and interpretation, is the leading force in both physical and conceptual innovation within craft disciplines. Lucy Lippard touches on this when looking at the realm of 'hobby art': "The innovative quilt maker or group of makers would come up with a new idea that broke or enriched the rules, just as Navajo rug maker might vary brilliantly within set patterns and modern abstractionists innovate by sticking to the rules of innovation"[19] Not only does this draw on a need to have the guidelines or instructions present in order to deviate from them, she also suggests there are particular rules of innovation, a further set of instructions that can be useful to fuel creativity.

[18] Celia Carey, *Alabama Storytellers | Quiltmakers of Gee's Bend* <https://www.pbs.org/video/alabama-public-television-documentaries-quiltmakers-of-gees-bend/> [accessed 1 July 2020].
[19] Lucy Lippard, *Something from Nothing (towards a definition of women's 'Hobby Art'), 1978,* Tanya Harrod, *Craft* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2018).

Figure 6. Pettway, Loretta, Various Improvisational Quilts, 1960

TO INSTRUCT: *within a community*

Instructions form the basis of a community in the ways knowledge can be transferred between members. The language surrounding making acts as a form of common understanding, allowing a sense of belonging, creating a culture of making. Ingold's discussion of in-built history feels particularly relevant for craft-based textile practices: "concentrated in skilled hands are capacities of movement and feeling that have been developed through life histories of past practice"[20]. Particularly when looking at handcrafted skills, the way in which we learn these skills feel central to the communities that build skill around them. The social and cultural components that comprise learning within a community shape how instructions are interpreted and used. There is a sense of inclusion present with knowing the vocabulary and short cuts of language that both aid the creative process but can also alienate[21]. Gaining instructions for a particular skill can almost act as a key into a private club yet even with the most clear directions, you can still feel out of your depth and excluded from a community.

Practical skill and creativity sit along a spectrum, particularly when you think about how a community of quilters may approach a specific approach. All of it however stems from tradition in one sense of another. In discussion with Chris English it was refreshing to talk to a fellow quilter who approached his craft with a hint of an outsider wanting to challenge convention, however there was a concurrence that even the most improvised of improv quilting still stems from a

[20] Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London ; New York: Routledge, 2013). p 115
[21] (referencing Glen Adamson) Elaine Cheasley Paterson and Susan Surette, *Sloppy Craft: Postdisciplinarity and the Crafts*, 2015. p. 7.

technically traditional instruction[22]. Community in some senses, forms the basis of tradition, providing a springboard to develop from, or a resistance to push against. Learning more about my own approach to quilting has shown me that I often use instructions as a means to depart from tradition or to find a level of friction within a community. This isn't about disrespect, but more of a conversation about traditional craft and how, as a contemporary textile maker, I navigate the idea of creativity and innovation within it.

Conclusion

The concluding points I wish to refer to look a clear application of instructional learning into other situations, calling on Sennett's phrase 'domain shift' that refers to the idea a tool or approach used by a maker could be applied to a different field[23]. Instructions are a gateway to practical skill and are ever more important if we are to keep the human connection to handcraft. Instructions lead us to understand things tacitly, allowing a bodily awareness to stretch beyond the tools and materials in our hands: "Tacit and tactile knowledges, are increasingly understood as central aspects of how we encounter and navigate the world"[24]. My belief is that practical skills centered around hand craft have the potential for us to not lose sight of the action, keeping us connected to material, narrative, community. Instructions allow us to build "self-reliance, resourcefulness, initiative and adaptability"[25]; I find these important by-products of instructions.

Instruction acts as a disruption or interruption; it challenges traditions and what is expected. Like triggers for change, they instigate an action which can therefore be enacted in one of many particular ways (or not at all). Breaking rules feels inherent to an authentic experience of a creative practice. You may need to understand something first, to follow guidelines and understand craft tradition through its history and narratives, but when push comes to shove, will you continue with what has gone prior, or use those very instructions as provocation for innovation? The answer to this is largely unknown as so much rests in the senses of what 'feels' right, but as Hirst argues: "'how will we know what 'right' is or what discovery looks and feels like? To begin, two main

[22] Author interview with Chris English, quilter, 15/06/2020
[23] Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Penguin Books, 2009). p. 127
[24] Ellen Sampson, 'Entanglement, Affect and Experience: Walking and Wearing (Shoes) as Experimental Research Methodology', *International Journal of Fashion Studies*, 5.1 (2018), 55–76 <https://doi.org/10.1386/infs.5.1.55_1>. p. 3
[25] F. Hackney, '"Use Your Hands for Happiness":: Home Craft and Make-Do-and-Mend in British Women's Magazines in the 1920s and 1930s', *Journal of Design History*, 19.1 (2006), 23–38 <https://doi.org/10.1093/jdh/epk003>. p. 32.

constants must be addressed: one involves identifying and observing underlying rules; and the other involves breaking them."[26]

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[26] Leslie Hirst, 'Groundwork' in *The Art of Critical Making: Rhode Island School of Design on Creative Practice*, ed. by Ma Alessandra L. Hermano and Rosanne Somerson (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, 2013). p. 37.

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