



Jess Day

Making Sense of Practice:

Methods for reviewing your visual diaries

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visual art, methods, visual diary, practice, research, practice-as-research

Summary: This text is an attempt to articulate how I use my visual diary and to identify methods that may be of interest and use to other visual artists. Images pepper the text as insights into my broader practice and the variety of outcomes resulting from my own use of these methods. This paper offers an invitation to the reader and provides the methods themselves with short descriptive instructions. The paper concludes with a short description of how I overcome creative block, and the suggestion to consider the visual diary as a living archive.

Dr. Jess Day is an artist, writer, art collections officer, and arts technician, who recently completed a PhD at Curtin University as the recipient of the Art in Conflict PhD Stipend Scholarship. They have enjoyed exhibiting locally and interstate, and has written for various art publications. Jess' practice examines highly individuated preparedness as emblematic of larger collective anxieties that surround speculative futures and survival. Outcomes manifest as sculptural objects with pragmatic functions and highly constructed landscapes informed by fiction and popular culture. In the studio, Jess uses materials gathered from military disposal stores, building and construction, emergency preparedness, prepping culture, camping, and car culture.

Jess lives and works on Boorloo country in Perth, Western Australia, where the land is rightfully owned by the Traditional Custodians of the land who never ceded sovereignty.

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Methods
for reviewing
your
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Introduction

In this paper I propose a series of instructional methods for artists who are interested in revisiting their visual diaries to extract and glean insights related to their practice. These are the methods I use in my own practice as recorded in my past visual diaries.

Over the course of four years, during which I completed my PhD, the approaches discussed in this paper developed with clear and reliable outcomes. It is my hope that some of the following methods may be of use to other artists seeking to understand and/or view their own practice from alternative angles or with greater objectivity.

This paper was written with the generous help of Nele Brökelmann, who partnered with me on this publication as part of the peer exchange and feedback process, and the incredible team at Landing from the Vilnius Academy of Arts, Lithuania.



Above: Pages from my second year Bachelor of Fine Arts degree visual journal (2013).

STUDIO NOTE:

The 'Studio note' idea came from the peer-to-peer feedback exchange which was a valuable component of writing this text and supported by Sophie Durand and Miklós Tamás Ambrózy of Landing. Nele Brökelmann, my feedback and exchange partner, suggested I include anecdotes and images that show examples of my own experiences of navigating the methods discussed in this text. The text is greatly improved by these additions, one of many benefits of our ongoing feedback exchange.

Research paradigm

A friend of mine, Jack, once sitting opposite to me at a thick Jarrah wood table, slid his page across and asked, "Do you know this one?" I looked down at a simple series of repeating loops drawn in the margin of the page. I looked at my page and realised I had been doodling loopy-running shapes along the edge of my page with a pencil. "I do," said I while drawing the loops he had shown me in the way I thought he must have made them. "Ah," said he, "But I do mine from the other direction." We paused, looking at each other, and in this moment, I felt I had met someone who understood me better than I understood myself, meeting me from the other direction, a mirror-like flash of light signalling me in a storm. For a moment, the whole world stood still as I felt that rush of deep connected calm. Here, in this moment, my concept of 'self' eroded and instead we existed in that smiling understanding of the process and joy that could be found in making simple parallel gestures in graphite.

About the visual diary

I define a visual diary as an active means to capture practice through the collection of text, images, ideas, material notes, and personal gestures. The visual diary logs that capturing process and thereby records aspects of your artistic practice, building a personal archive of your practice and relationship with the world around you. This visual diary may take many forms, though once established, that form tends to stick.

1
For example, I was particularly attached to a ring-bound 100-page A4 visual diary with a hard cardboard backing and a cheap plastic cover. About 5 years ago, these became impossible to find in my local art suppliers, then more broadly across the Perth Metropolitan Area. I was forced to change either my inability to pre-order visual diaries online or the type of diary I was using. In the end, a friend gifted me a visual diary before I was forced to make this choice, and it happened to be a black cover A4 Moleskin with blank unruled pages. Somewhat sinfully, this was the first time I had a visual diary that cost more than \$10, and after using the paper inside every day for 100 days, I could not return to my frugal ring-bound friend, even if it was easily available in the future.



Above: Visual Diary Pages relating to a work I made titled Tent Temple in 2014

I've kept a visual diary since my first Bachelor of Fine Arts unit. Initially, this was merely to fulfil a unit assessment criterion, but over the months of increasingly using the journal, I saw the value in continuing the practice. Over time, this 'value' became a need to capture aspects of my practice or visual thinking that felt important to remember or could be recalled later should I forget them.

I define a visual diary as an object that allows you to notate or capture the ways in which you visually create, think, research, and generally experience the world and your relationship with it.

For this reason, the visual diary should be highly portable, easy to access regularly, and easy for you to use. This may not be a physical book, like the visual diary I use, but could look different depending on how you work, where you live, and what you prefer.

I use my visual diary every day. My visual diary allows a variety of functions, all of which I find calming, focusing, and/or an outlet for streams of visual ideas.

As a physical A4 object, I have begun to buy my bags, jackets, and so forth to fit my visual diary, shaping my body around the need to carry the visual diary with me. On the days I work in the studio, the visual diary acts to capture testing, often thrown down on a paint-covered table, or situated nearby so I can quickly add notes on masking tape or scrap paper into the visual diary pages.

On the days I work at my paid job, I often find comfort in blocking out areas of colour on pages which previously contained only line drawings.

In the evenings I often have it nearby when playing board games with friends to annotate scores or narrative developments. This allows a casual capturing of ideas generated from a shared activity involving discovery, exploration, possibility, conflict, and cooperation. On the days I visit friends, or see a new exhibition, the visual diary allows me to consider the experiences both as verbal, textual, and visual in the sense that quick drawings or notes may prompt a feedback or dialogue with the work or person in relation to my own practice.

Most of the work I do in these visual diaries, of which I would average about four per year, is unseen prior to this publication. Previously the relationship between others and my visual diaries was limited to artist talks, where often I would hand around visual diaries, or share elements of the thinking in teaching moments in the university classroom.

Sharing my visual diaries

In my final exhibited body of work as part of the PhD assessment process, I showed every journal I had made over the four years of research. Each diary had its own shelf made from recycled fence posts scavenged from local rubbish collection. I included all the visual diaries I had used during my PhD in the final exhibition. The visual diaries were flipped open, and visitors could flip through the pages at their own interest and pace.

Very recently (December 2025—January 28th, 2026) I showed a series of drawn works extracted from drawings in my visual diaries for the first time in my career. Goolugatup Heathcote assisted in realising my first solo exhibition at a gallery, not an artist-run collective or initiative. This solo was supported by the gallery and the City of Melville as part of the award for winning the Melville Contemporary Award in 2024.

This exhibition was also my first major show after completing my PhD in Fine Art at Curtin University. It felt like an opportunity to show this visually expanded notion of my practice—to exhibit something new and draw from the well of resources I had built up over the four years of PhD studies.

Red Circular Mask Garden Hose
Arrays Fountain Reconfigured



Black Triangular Mask Garden Hose
Arrays Fountain Reconfigured

Both images are the same visual diary page generated by using method 5.

During the doctoral journey, it sometimes felt crippling to continuously put ideas on hold, knowing I did not have time or resources to pursue them while completing my doctorate. But this period helped me realise how separate I had kept my visual diaries from my exhibited practice to that point. I needed to collapse that distinction and decided to distil some of the drawings made during studio testing into components of the larger installation. The link between my visual diary and my exhibited outcomes is something I intend to continue to develop and investigate within my practice.

Invitation

I think of the visual diary as the most tangible form of accessing the artistic process and making sense of our own understanding of culture, theory, and forms relevant to the current project, and linked more broadly to our overall practices.

This is because the visual diary is one of the various known forms of capturing a practice over time, other examples including written journals, photographic series or albums, draft music sheets, botanical drawings, fieldwork notebooks, shorthand taken on set, or minutes of recurring meetings.

These inscriptions capture specific information as interpreted over time, showing progress and associated thinking in various ways, and vary in their form depending on the nature of the practice you are capturing. I believe that the process of reviewing your old visual diaries may allow for the discovery of new beginnings in your own practice.

I would like to invite you to try the following methods of reviewing your own visual thinking. They may be altered or developed as required by the individual. These methods all act as lenses, or ways of seeing your own practice differently. They may be of particular use to those researchers who 'can no longer see the wood for the trees'—in other words, those who feel overwhelmed by their own visual languages and are looking for objectivity.

How the visual diary may provide insight to the person working within it

Recently I was speaking with other artists in my local area. I was surprised to hear not all artists review their own visual journals, and that the systems of extracting information or insight from my own practice may be of interest to others.

What can these methods of extraction offer you, as an artist apart from a means of logging your own processes of self-reflection and self-critical development?

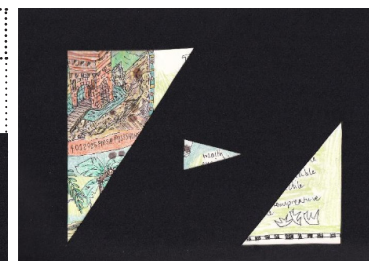
The proposed methods below combine multiple means of engaging with your own historic content; this methodology attempts to enable multiple visual means by which self-reflection or self-critical thinking can take place.

The methodology²

2 These methods build on the well-established creative or practice-led research methodology laid out by Barbara Bolt in chapter two of *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (2019, 27-34). The chapter titled *The Magic is in Handling* explains Bolt's argument that it is not the art object itself that should be the sole focus of creative research, but rather "art as a mode of revealing and as a material productivity" and that it is "not just the artwork that constitutes creative arts research" (34).

also incorporates a structured element of 'randomisation' or 'known disruption,' which introduces an element of novelty to the processes of reflection, increasing the likelihood of moments of felt 'discovery' or 'uncovering.' By building means of self-documenting into the methods, the methodology includes a series of tangible and practical outcomes in the forms of photographs, notes, and video and/or audio recording, which you can use to evaluate your own outcomes and trajectories.

Red Circular Mask Garden Hose
Arrays Fountain Reconfigured



Black Triangular Mask Garden Hose
Arrays Fountain Reconfigured

Both images are the same visual diary page generated by using method 5.

How I used the methods

Using your selected visual diaries for the time period you wish to assess and reflect on, work front to back flagging any page or entry that contains reference to an unpursued 'driver' - or motivating interest that may be driving your studio investigations.

Note these on blank paper. You may wish to only note different unpursued 'drivers.' This outcome provides the artist with a list of things they can do in the studio in times when creative block strikes or listlessness overcomes you. Alternatively, you may wish to note down both the unpursued 'drivers' and how many similar or linked unpursued and pursued ideas can be linked to each 'driver.'

The benefit of this outcome is that it provides the above list as well as a mapped series of links within your practice that occur over a period of time (defined by the visual diaries you have selected),

and thus can be seen and considered in a non-linear format in relation to your current practice.

For either approach, it is recommended that you map out the information you extract in one of the following ways (or your own mapping/annotation system): ● a page for each driver, ● a hand drawn table of drivers, ● a mind-map of drivers with the current project or desired outcome in the centre, ● a linear point and line map, ● a rhizomic map (use if you are approaching your historic visual diary timeline in a non-linear way).



How/where I grew up - Polaroid prints, annotated and seen

Above: Polaroids taken during my PhD research of the shed at my childhood home.

How I set up the space / room setup

By breaking the space up into sections, the artist is encouraged to consider the exhibition or lay out space as a working and 'white cube' or 'blank' site in which discovery can happen, and research may be performed. This is particularly helpful if you are forced to select a section of your bedroom to perform these methods in, as artists occasionally are. This visual distinction will encourage the 'working' and active researching approach and mentality, aiding the artist in gaining an element of objectivity about a series of diaries that likely contain some deeply personal anecdotes or potentially derailing content.

The materials and space required to engage with these methods can be adapted to the artist's convenience and interest, as well as what is practical and affordable. In this way, I aim to provide accessible, instructive, and tangible ways in which creative research can take place.

Some questions you can consider if you wish to try this process are below. The best questions will be the ones you ask of yourself, but these may act as prompts.

Why would the processes of reviewing assist in locating our inspirations?

What excited us and drove the processes of making three years ago, and are they the same or different now?

What discoveries did we make while working towards a 'final' or 'completed' visual outcome?

Did that adhesive work well considering the final install location?

All methods use the following tools/materials:

Previous visual diaries or journals or access to your online/digital equivalent.

Flags / post it notes / scraps of paper / bookmarks to mark pages of interest.

Blank paper (ideally loose and in a few sizes, A4+A3 is great).

Pens / pencils / markers.

String / wool / sticks / rope / floor-friendly masking tape. Use to divide the room up.

An empty room or clean area that you can demarcate. Give yourself as much room as you can reasonably achieve.

Camera or phone to record / capture moments (I recommend something like a disposable camera or a Polaroid camera if that is an option for you, as well as a regular camera or phone with a camera). Or a voice recorder, video camera on a tripod, GoPro or body cam equivalent as preferred and available to you.

*or whatever equivalent is available/makes sense to you.

Room setup

The methods below all have the same basic physical setup

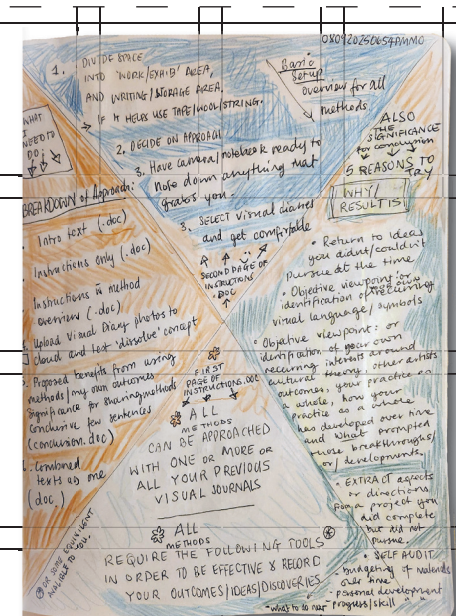
1. Divide the space you have allocated for yourself into a working space, exhibition space, or layout space. One area will be for making notes and storing things you aren't using, the other should be kept clear until you begin a method. This will allow you a visual distinction between where your focus currently is while reflecting on the overall timeline of your practice.

2. Choose a method / decide on your approach and note down what you want to achieve on a blank bit of paper. Put that aside. If you become overwhelmed or 'get lost' in flipping through previous self-generated content, you can return to this page for direction. You can also use it as self-assessment of the overall process and your outcomes (I usually do this a few days afterwards as it helps me to be more objective and honest with myself about my outcomes).

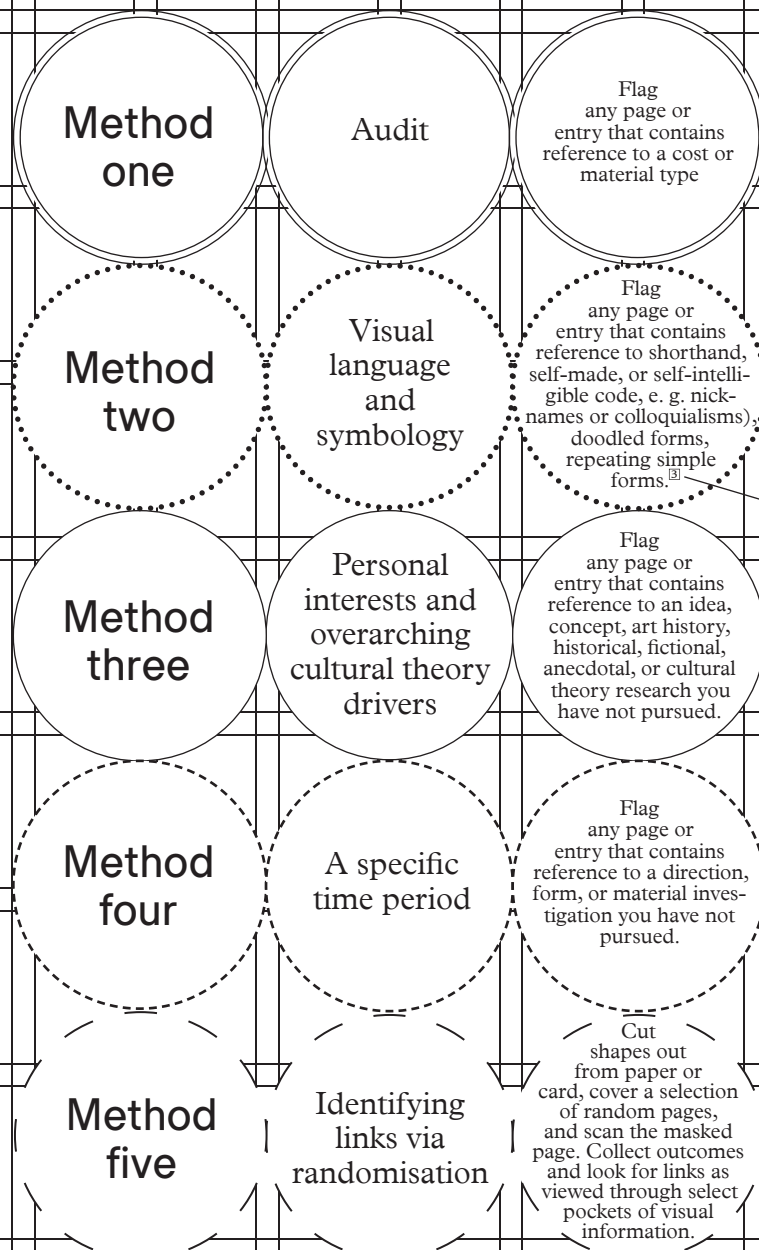
3. Have a camera and your blank paper with pens/pencils/markers ready to note down anything that interests you while reflecting on your previous visual diaries.

4. Based on your approach (see point 2), select the number of visual diaries you are working with. This may take some time, or it may be as simple as 'October to February' of a particular year, or over a series of years. Place these to one side of your exhibition space or layout space.

5. Proceed with a method based on your approach. The methods below are suggestions based on my own personal outcomes and testing, and you may wish to tweak them to better suit your own needs or practice.



Above: A page from my visual diary mapping out ideas and approaches for this text. This map was made with notes from using methods two and three.



As I found and noted down content relevant to the method I was using, I also added any novel moments to a separate sheet of paper.

I also noted any important context or relevant notes I found in my visual diaries and transferred it to post-it notes or scraps of paper. I would tape these notes around the overall map I was making (of separate pages, hand-drawn table, linear point or line map etc.).

3 I recommend prioritising either the outcome of developing a better understanding of your own shorthand and 'personal alphabet,' or the focus on repeating similar simple forms. Both approaches will provide the artist with a series of extracted visual drawings. Your own use of numbers and annotations. (Do you note down the date? The time? Do numbers not exist within your visual journal? Is that surprising?)



Ideas for the recent group show 'The Fountain' in my visual diary. These forms were identified as important using methods two and three.

My visual diaries at the end
of using the methods listed



When I had compiled the information I had been looking for in my visual diaries, I tidied up my map a bit and placed it next to the pile of diaries, and took a photo.

STUDIO NOTE REGARDING 'SELF-INTELLIGIBLE CODE'

I have made up the term 'self-intelligible code' to describe a shorthand you can read but others may not immediately understand.

I needed to create a consistent way to measure time and dates in my visual diary. At the time I was struggling with the malaise of time-blindness, an experience I am familiar with, but greatly exacerbated by the process inherent to postdoctoral studies.

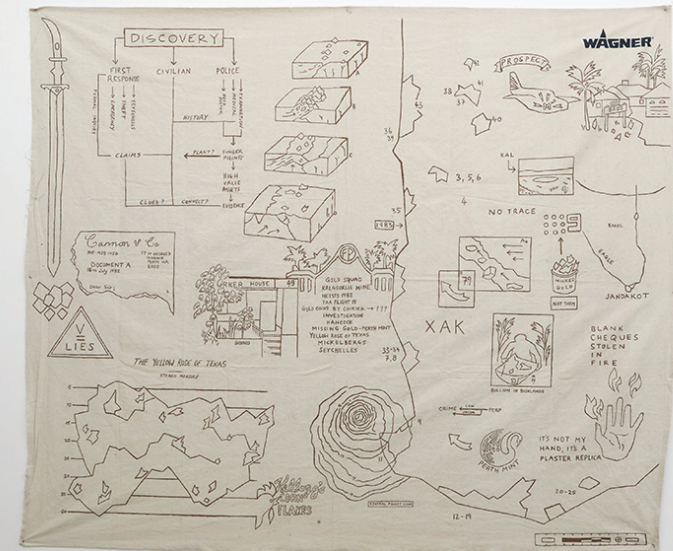
This resulted in a shorthand or 'self-intelligible code.'

I was attempting to both log the time to ensure I was aware of it, and to see which days of the week were more productive for certain types of work (writing or studio, material testing or buying, researching or documenting). Naturally the days and productivity oscillated wildly, but the habit of the shorthand has stuck, and I find it interesting to review sometimes.

I switched out my map with the novel moments and took another photo... you get the idea. These iterations of collected visual moments can be used in moments of creative block, and personally prompted a few previously overlooked connections in my research.

The photos can also act as a guideline from which you might prioritise the discoveries you have made. For example, I removed the air dry clay material, which I had been previously using in my practice while doing my PhD, when I noticed it was an anomaly in relation to the material criteria I was working with at the time. I would also recommend a short paragraph and/or drawing in your current visual diary about this process for possible future use or reference.

Jess Day The Sometimes-Colourful Fate of Contemporary Nuggets at First Draft Gallery, Sydney. Photo by Zan Wimberley. This work was part of a collaborative exhibition with Emma Buswell.

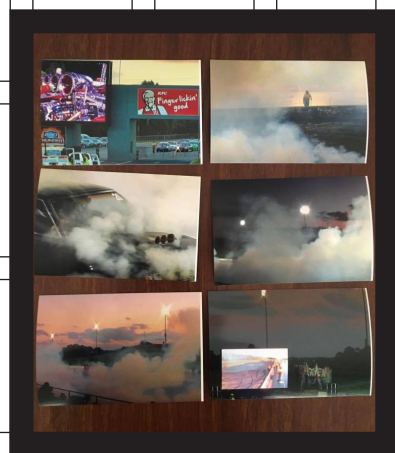


Over the course of my higher degree studies, I had to find ways to distil the density of information my visual diaries generate, and locate nexus points in the research to write the thesis. The scope of the project, and thus the size and number of visual diaries, was huge. I was capturing the suddenly overwhelming interest in the subject, and knew that missing a moment could be devastating to the overall project. It became vital to track the research. The methods above were developed during this time.



Jess Day, Hope for the Best Prepare for the Worst at Cool Change Gallery, 2021

I propose an artist can use these methods to locate tangible evidence of material productivity and testing within their own practice. These methods propose ways in which you can track development, material testing, related interests, and the development of skill sets.



Stills from Burnout Boss, a video artwork I made in 2016. Laid out in the studio, prior to being added to my visual diary at the time. I was trying different configurations to see how the images worked narratively.

Overcoming creative block

Although the visual diary is just one aspect of my practice, it is also the baseline which the entire practice builds from. My visual diary is a physical place (a bound object of standard size and colour) that enables me to capture a sense or gesture in the moment. A place to release the visual images that spring to mind when working or researching. A place for all of the notes, studio and material tests, research, quotes, moments of engagement with peers

or friends, cuttings from papers, and drawings to live together. My visual diaries are a living archive of my practice and allow a kind of time travel, a means to recall or relate to my own practice, past and present, that may be highly generative to new ways of working or thinking about making. Personally, I have also found these methods really productive for moving through moments of creative block.

I have proposed five ways in which you might glean insights into your own visual thinking by reviewing your visual diaries. These methods enable direct tangible outcomes, achieved through reviewing work you have already made. I invite you to try these methods as they may aid in capturing a series of insights or ideas from your own overall approaches to practice and making.

In reviewing my own visual diaries, I have found that I have developed a better overall understanding of my own practice. This has naturally increased my interest in how artists develop visual language, think about making, and relate to the culture, present, and history in which they are situated. I hope these methods can enable a break in the current creative block by providing a lens through which disruption of the 'known' enables new connections. I would like to thank Nele Brökelmann and the Landing team for their interest in the ways in which a visual diary may be utilised.

The Living Archive: another way of thinking about the visual diary process

In my work as a collections officer caring for a collection of artworks, which is my primary form of income, I can draw conclusions about an artwork based on its material composition, the annotations or inscriptions on the surface, the way in which it was made. Another approach is to consider the historic visual diaries as a personal archive or collection you hold. This collection of personal practice-related thinking is a living archive, and this idea can be another way in which you can relate to and think about your own visual diaries. The approach of considering the visual diary as a living archive to which I would continue to contribute, reconfigure, and stretch into, helped me to engage the visual diaries through a form of novelty, making objectivity about my own processes a little easier.

Farewell for now

I have proposed a series of instructional methods and a methodology by which visual artists may review and return to previous visual diaries they have made to better understand or glean a new aspect/outcome from their own approaches to making. Embedded throughout are studio notes which evidence aspects of the peer-to-peer exchange, which was an integral aspect of writing this contribution.

To title this a 'conclusion' would be an act of deception, so for now I will say farewell. As I write, I have more questions and ideas for work and material investigations than I did when beginning the writing process. And for this, as well as the opportunity to share the value I find in the visual journal process, I am forever grateful. I hope the practice you have continues to flourish and grow with you.

—Jess Day, 2025.

References

Bolt, Barbara. "The Magic is in Handling." In Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry, edited by Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt, 27–34. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019



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