Phenomenological analysis as a methodology for practice-led research in Fine Art

My practice-led research aims to problematize painting, with the hope to contribute promoting the practice of its encounter: an activity in which a painting’s operating structure manifests itself as a fascinating discontinuous unity. My painting practice operates on and outside the thresholds of painting’s traditional techniques, as material and methodological ‘rawness’ allows a more direct investigation of the multidimensional logic of painting. Such a paradoxical logic, which is embodied by each painting uniquely, is the focus of my phenomenological analyses, which articulate the many levels of relations informing a painting’s participating-parts, instead of addressing any detail per se. These two practices, together with the investigation of philosophical systems alternative to classical ontology, also operate as a discontinuous unity (with the difference that my practice-led research is structurally a developing system, as opposed to artworks, which are immanent).

Although I am mostly practicing my phenomenological analyses on my finished artworks, the latter are not the objects of a case study.\(^1\) They constitute an enjoyable discipline improving my sensuous understanding of painting and a source of unconscious inspiration for my studio practice. It is important to note that the relation between the two practices is a horizontal one, as the artworks do not require to be understood via analysis, nor does the intention of analysing them in the future affect the choices, which gives form to their making. After the non-verbal pleasure of meeting the newly finished artwork and acknowledging that it finally is/works, the practice of verbally translating the many ways in which an artwork works entails another kind of pleasure. Such pleasure derives from the intertwining between the poetic/analytic struggle and the prolonged, intense moments of visual contact that are both critical (else they would not ground any observations) and participating (else they would just not see the artwork operating). The phenomenological analysis is constituted of both the activities inseparably: the analytical intent intensifies the involvement of the gaze, which relentlessly addresses the whole of the painting and its parts to locate interfering features that are nodal in the artwork, while the sensuous fascination for what is seen keeps the intellect away from attempting any extraction of meaning. Such a refusal to give meaning does not make phenomenological analysis a purely formalistic one. On the contrary, phenomenology’s way of investigating cultural references is substantially different from that of hermeneutics. In fact, while hermeneutics is interested in ordering an artwork’s complexity to formulate hypotheses transcending its immanent dimension, phenomenology is interested in locating an artwork’s nodes only to understand how one dwells in and among them. In other terms,

\(^1\) This could not be the case in any way, because the mapping of an operating structure informed by a multidimensional logic is never complete and definitive, therefore it might never be transformed into an objective output.
the latter does not want to diminish, but to appreciate further a structure's multifaceted – or even multidimensional – set of interrelating cultural references. The goal of an analysis of the first kind is to generate conceptual knowledge, even if this automatically implies the collapse of a node into a point, while the goal of an analysis of the second kind is to develop one’s dexterity (or sensual/embodied knowledge) in gently handling/problematizing an artwork’s nodes for their evocative power.

Sometimes, the analysis of an artwork’s node goes beyond the limits of phenomenological analysis and inspires general assertions on ways in which painting can be categorized according to its functioning. The writing of such kind of hypothesis allows them to be put to the background, where - in a state of latency from consciousness which might lasts for months - they can recombine with other issues, features and serendipitous sparks that unconsciously inform the making of new artworks, which might appear to challenge them to a subsequent analysis.

Alberto Condotta

AHRC-M3C PhD candidate,

Centre for Fine Art Research (CFAR),

Birmingham School of Art,

Birmingham City University (BCU).