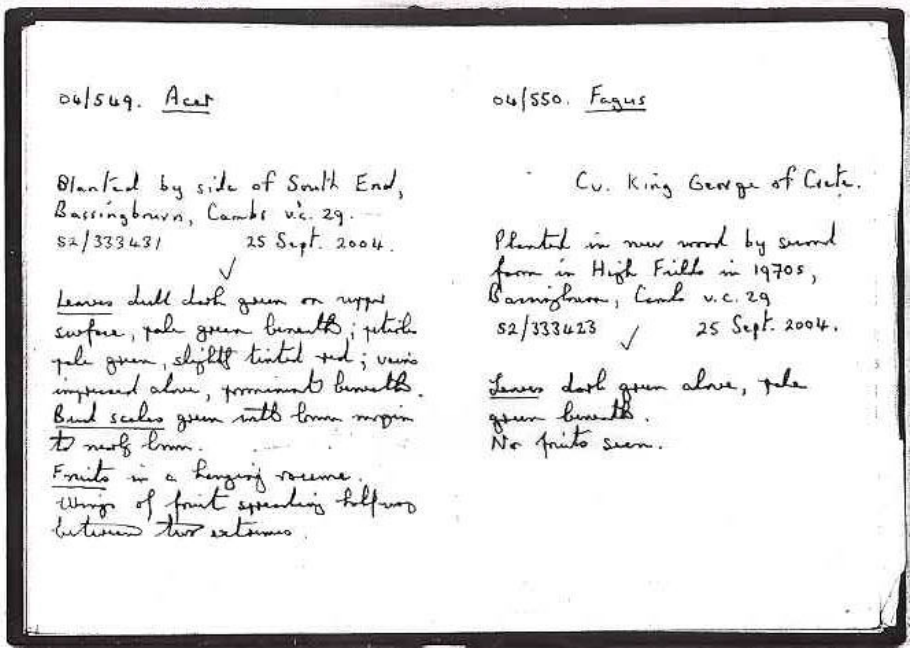
As a scientist who has changed direction to become craftsperson then artist, I have found my research training has provided a firm base for my artistic practice. It is not clear where this training came from. At school we were taught the basic method of experiment, record, interpret, but it was never spoken of as a working method, that there could be others, that such a method might lead to one of several interpretations. As a collector then, starting and building up the school Herbarium, I recorded basic facts of place and time but little else. Had I been shown other ways would my later work have taken different directions and led to different interpretations? I think it would. BY the time I reached University it was assumed I had a working method, that I knew how to handle the recording process. Later fieldwork involved accurate, detailed recording of animal species in an area of wetland in the USA, resulting in extensive field notebooks, records of species found and drawings. Fifteen years later extensive travels in Eastern Europe meeting basketmakers, watching them work, gaining knowledge of their social and economic lives and a sense of the rapidly changing nature of their practices has resulted in a further series. Both sets of notebooks have had a strong bearing on my current artistic production.

I have found this process of looking back and connecting my apparently different lives a welcome opportunity but also a strangely unsettling one. There is no doubt that field notes are extremely personal things. Most of us use particular paper, notebook size, the same pen. We set off with little training, often without discussion in any detail, left to short experience and native wit, and then, although making public some of the findings, very rarely revealing the notes themselves to others. The methods used in taking them obviously have an important relationship to what is sometimes still thought of as the truth, the scientific fact. Perhaps certain methods of notetaking lead to certain kinds of creativity both scientifically and artistically. I have no strong theoretical framework within which I now operate but I have kept field notes all my life, only recently questioning their validity.


04/549. Acer

Planted by side of South End, Bassingbourn, Cambs v.c. 29.
52/333431 25 Sept. 2004.
✓
Leaves dull dark green on upper surface, pale green beneath; petiole pale green, slightly tinted red; veins impressed above, prominent beneath. Bud scales green with brown margin to most brown.
Fruits in a hanging raceme. Wings of fruit spreading to form between them an obtuse

04/550. Fagus

Cv. King George of Crete.

Planted in new wood by second from in High Fields in 1970s, Barningham, Cambs v.c. 29
52/333423 ✓ 25 Sept. 2004.

Leaves dark green above, pale green beneath.
No fruits seen.

When I asked the Director of Cambridge University Botanic Garden, at one time a field botanist, what he knew of field notes his reply was “good heavens, nothing at all!” When we both trained and became scientists in the ‘60s we both went out into the field with little but a few conversations with our supervisors, a note book, pen and maybe a pencil. My own study, an investigation of the spider population on a small area of rare uncharted fenland in central Wisconsin, involved a random sampling system of square yards of earth, recording every spider found within a square yard, and the dominant plant species. The results, copious listings, were recorded systematically after extraction of the animals from the vegetation and their identification, where possible.I knew of no parallels, though there would have been many, so it was work in isolation which may have missed many important field factors through ignorance of what to record although the statistical methods were standard ones. As far as I remember many of the ecologists were in a similar position.

(1) Field Notebooks Peter Sell 2006

Peter Sell, working for 50 years as a field botanist at the Cambridge Herbarium, maintains that being self-taught is an advantage. There is no bias from other’s interests or intentions. It is a comforting view! (1) He started taking his notes at about the age of 15, his method then being maintained to the present although he does not know how that method was arrived at. It has remained unchanged in spite of ever growing experience. His base line is that, away from the field, **you do not remember** so the three strands of his recording experience are all a vital part of that process. In his pocket in the field there is always a small black note book, the modern versions of which annoy him as they don’t stay open, then there is a writing up book, slightly bigger and an amplification of the first but only written up every few months or so . The third strand is the specimens themselves. The latter, destined for the

herbarium, are securely labelled with a tie on label, this having a pencil text of date and specimen number (now up to about 50,000) and these are then pressed and preserved the same day otherwise they are past prime condition and rendered useless. (2) All parts, leaves, stems, fruits, roots are individually named, these labels never again being taken off. He deplores the informal methods of recognition, tying on pieces of grass, putting one in a left-hand pocket, and also the use of biro or ink which will disappear in wet conditions. A pencil is the only thing. Certainly waiting to do some of this until you are down the mountain or out of the bog is out of the question. All this is accompanied by full grid reference but even then it may be hard to go back to exactly the same place. This work of trying to capture the moment and the place has been mimicked in my own work. At our different institutions we were left to absorb key basic ideas, from 'great thinkers' , by a kind of osmosis, an assumption that clear teaching was not necessary.

(2) In the Herbarium 2006

This continuous series of notebooks is the work of a meticulous scientist, perhaps obsessive, but who works immensely hard for accuracy. Much of this daily activity is boring, he concedes, the oudoor time and the sense of discovery being the reward for such immensely hard work. He wonders if anyone will be prepared to undergo this dedicated work in the future. He doubts if contemporary botanists have the stamina – a retired man talking! He admits that even his rigor and years of experience don't mean he doesn't miss crucial details, an event particularly possible when working with other people. I wonder now how much more would have been recorded as a result of detailed discussion in the field. It seems likely that extensions of the recording methods would have yielded a broader picture.

In my next life as basketmaker, with a strong sense of the historical background to my craft and the vital necessity to record it before it was lost, I again started to take field notes, simply recording everything I could in the time available and asking as many questions of elderly basketmakers as I could think of. The questions I asked were on three fronts, technical – how do you form a square corner on this basket? Social: what do you make, where do you make them, where did you learn, and economic: how many do you

make, how much has this changed over time? Gradually a useful set of questions emerged, the process became more systematic, and the uncovered information gave a picture of each maker and his practice as well as something of the local employment activities. I built up a series of small spiral bound reporters notebooks with notes, sketches, insertions and additions, apparently informal but with my own system, intelligible to me and very personal. Little of the supposed scientific rigour here, but perhaps more of a reflection of what happens in a field where interview and observation is the basic way of gathering information. This is a real difference from the scientific field notes which should, indeed must, be interpretable by others. Most of my basket life has been spent outside institutions and I was almost alone in doing this kind of work and it never occurred to me to do anything except plough on in my own way. But slowly I refined a system which, looking back on the evidence I have collected, has allowed me to record most of what I still want and find interesting. Others with a different set of questions and slant of interests might have reached other conclusions. This idea intrigues me.

A seven week trip round rural Poland in 1991 involved the development of a new system of small black A5 books, pocketable, without lines and not too conspicuous. Many of the basketmakers I met, smallholders and crafts people in remote regions, felt threatened by a small tape recorder I carried such things not, at that time being available in remote rural Poland. Anyway, new batteries were hard to come by. My research equipment involved two cameras, one for colour print, another SLR with close-up lens for slides and my precious note books, very basic but adequate. In the field, in a back kitchen or garden shed, I juggled these to collect as full a record as possible. This was, of course, determined in part by translation help, a hazard in that unpleasant facts could be omitted although my increasing level of Polish often allowed me to recognise that. The extremes of rural poverty, the rapidly changing cultural and economic life with the removal of certain securities the communist state provided, the consequent insecurities for basketmakers would be hidden, questions being ignored. The great political upheavals of two years before, grievances against buyers and willow growers would be strongly outlined, often to be tempered later by another perspective from the buyers and willow growers themselves.

(3) Polish Basketmaker, Rudnik 1991

(3) This woman, making quick agricultural baskets, one an hour for 5 days a week, 8 per day, outside as much of the year as possible, and using Saturday to prepare material for the following week's work, revealed the sheer hard work of the piece work system. She and her husband, who worked their small holding, lived very simply, going into the village once a week to deliver baskets to the wholesaler, but were keen not to dwell on their hardship and difficulty in making ends meet. Only afterwards, from my host at the wholesaler did I get a realistic impression of living in this way.

By the time I had had two British Council trips to Hungary to investigate their basket practices I had a more systematic working method. The equipment was the same, highly portable, minimal. The change was travelling with a translator/interpreter provided by the Ministry of Culture. Polgar Judit was an amazing woman with a great knowledge of Hungarian cultural life and a determination to get me to my desired destination with the least cost, we both being provided with £10 a day, a tight budget in the early 90's. Her wide experience of so many aspects of rural and city life made for highly memorable trips. Much information about training schools in basket 'factories', the state of the market, types of baskets made in different regions was easy to find. The siteing of this information in it's cultural context was new. Having some history of cultural groups from Judit allowed me to draw extraordinary conclusions about the persistence of unusual techniques brought by migration from an area of Germany 300 years earlier, and to meet gypsy basketmakers working, for themselves and for barter, within their local community.

(o1) A notebook page reveals the rather untidy method, notes often taken while walking or standing in the rain, or even as unobtrusively as possible.

4. One of the Karoly brothers with Maple frame basket, Szendrolad, Hungary 1993

The visit to the Gypsies (4) in North East Hungary was arranged by the Ethnographic Museum but the Curator who also came, went off to discuss a major village feud relating to children's shoes and I was left with the family for the whole day and late into the night. No language here apart from the tiny amount I had picked up, just watching, photography, gesture and drawing. I think I learnt a great deal and was certainly made to feel welcome, though an object of curiosity, at one time 18 people being crammed into the bedroom to watch me watching the work in progress. This involved the production of superb frame baskets with multiply uses, apples, potatoes, babies, washing, from 'Black Maple', gathered and prepared before our arrival. This was their usual form but backpacks (5) were made when needed and spare material was used for baskets for barter within the community. This backpack with plastic tape, at that time rare in the village, was worth more in barter than the beautiful wood split ones that I valued so highly because of their wonderful execution.

5. The Karoly family with grandfather's backpack 1991

The notebooks on these three major trips were complimented by a series of detailed daily accounts of my activities and impressions of people and places. There is almost always considerable time spent alone, often in places that seemed isolated or even dangerous. Writing a diary not only occupies that time, but fleshes out the field notebook, outlines all sorts of apparent clues to the lives of those I have spent the day with, and brings up further questions that need to be asked to fill gaps. Now when I look at these, I find whole days I had completely forgotten about, which I found astounding when I first realised it. Reading my daily account brings the whole experience back into my mind's eye. Here, of course, is further interpretation or invention 15 years on. The interpretive process begins after reflection and the incorporation of information from 'outsiders', those who were not there. I am amused that much concentration in my secondary notebooks deals with food – I was quite hungry a lot of the time!

This time alone, I have realised, is essential for my research. Trips in company, with convivial evenings spent in talk, are a separate activity, still learning a lot about basketmakers' working lives but with no time to be either systematic or record. There is, however, almost nothing nicer than a warm European evening eating long slow meals with a multilingual group under the trees and doing our best to discuss our mutual interests. On each solo trip I bought baskets not only because it is politic to do so; you are, after all, wasting the basketmakers time and it is all piece work.

6. Polish country basket, bought from a braod bean seller, Wadowice market 1991

These baskets(6) were carefully chosen to demonstrate regional techniques, unusual weaves, forms with a highly specific function. On the Polish trip I managed to assemble 250 baskets at a basket 'factory' in Southern Poland and, with their good will, sent them home in a container on one of the 3 trains a week that arrived in Tilbury. These were exhibited extensively and became a 'field note' of a different sort, a recording for the public without much comment, just description.

The baskets bought in Hungary and sent over by the Ethnographic Museum from Budapest have also been shown widely and 50 of them are now in the safe keeping of the British Museum. But even in the sending there is tampering of the evidence! Rough and ready baskets never arrived. In Poland I bought two twiggy baskets, made from hedgerow material for personal use, interesting to me in that many people had some knowledge of the skills. Neither ever arrived.

(7) This man in the third market permitted after the fall of communism in the basket village of Rudnik in Southeast Poland had a beautiful frame basket made by a professional but his rougher but interesting shopper (on the right) was not the output of a expert. They had been edited out, yet 4 years later I found them still in the store. 'We didn't think they were good enough'. The authority figures there had decided we must only see the best of their activities as a matter of pride.

7. Basketmaker, Rudnik market, SE Poland 1991

A Latvian trip of 1996 followed a similar pattern of using my developing field expertise, targeting and relying on a number of informants such as leaders of basket groups set up in the '70's to preserve the craft and the Ethnographic Museum, asking the now familiar range of questions but this trip had a definite target, the buying of some baskets for the growing British Museum collection of Eastern European artefacts. This altered my out look profoundly. I no longer felt free to choose things of great interest for myself and the overall scheme of my work, but had to try to evaluate what would be of greatest long-term value to the nation, what would best represent the Latvian craft at that time. Was it worth making a trip; would the objects I found be of sufficient interest, would they adequately reflect the individual craftsperson? I nevertheless brought back some beautiful and fascinating objects but it caused me to reflect on my previous trips and the ways I had selected previously. What had my criteria been? Had I had any? Function entered into it, each basket type being highly specific in it's relationship to activities rapidly disappearing. A potato basket (8) used across much of Southern Poland as a tally measure might soon be replaced by a more modern container. The technique of it and the form itself were part of the equation but the process was never systematised.

8. Making potato baskets SE Poland 1930's (photographer unknown)

My own personal making changed from consumer-led functional items, to a more self-expressive approach – I was, incidentally, catapulted into this by being a Research Fellowship as basketmaker, here at MMU as part of the Faculty of Art and Design. I had a wonderful walk to my office through the huge embroidery studio every morning and was intrigued to see the sampling and sketching on everyone's boards. At the end of my 3 years here an exhibition 'Beyond the Bounds' concerning the crossovers between basketry and textiles forced me to go home and make, at top speed, something 'contemporary', (9) three large cones based on the traditional eel-trap form found both here and abroad.

(9) 'Three Cones', Mary Butcher, 'Beyond the Bounds' MMU 1996

Art practice for most is also bound up with what we might call field notes. Courses demand sketch books, resource books, notebooks. Sampling and drawing are regarded as necessities. Here is the basic teaching that my scientific beginnings lacked.

The inclusion of absolutely anything here, not knowing what is irrelevant or what sparks off ideas, and the degree of accuracy are in contrast to types of field work I had previously undertaken. Constant exclusion and selection and rejection become a fundamentally important parts of the recording activity. .

(10) Colle Verde, Tuscany, Italy March 2006

A month in Italy this spring as Artist-in-residence on an olive oil and wine farm in Tuscany |(10, 11) gave examples of different ways of registering that experience.

(11) Vineyard, Colle Verde March 2006

The first week was spent walking and looking, recorded in a daily diary and with photography. Field notes in the form of collections of materials and found objects surrounded my living space. Just gathering but highly selectively but still without set criteria. Some drawing followed, a further level of note began to emerge as I put my gathered materials together in ways I enjoyed, creating line and shadow on the wall behind my growing curtain of plant strings (12,13).

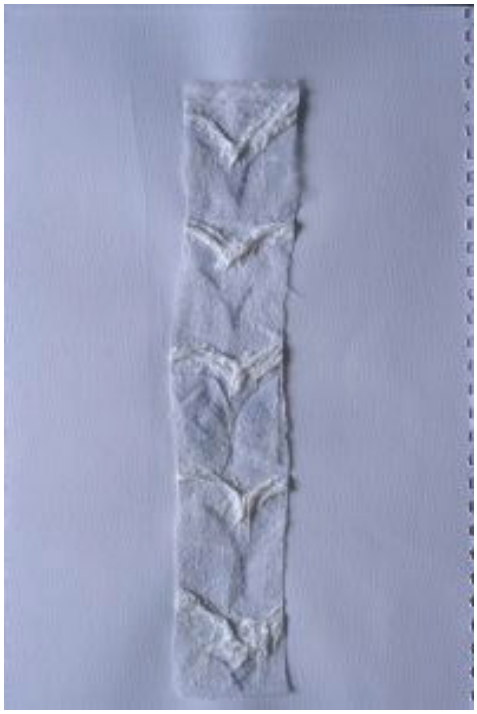
(12) 'Plant Strings' Mart Butcher, March 2006

(13)'Curled Magnolia leaf string' Mary Butcher March 2006

Even the strings were locally gathered – one of my first haunts is always the local hardware store, here for vine tie material, glitzy washing line and fine linen thread. Hours were spent trying arrangements and spacing, a 3D notebook, clear reminders to me of place of collection, time of day, weather, distance from home, scarcity or abundance. A later development, a further method of interpretation involved collage, paint, ink, pencil (14).

(14)'Vineyard' Mary Butcher print July 2006

I was investigating further ways to look at the shapes of pruned vines, the repetitions of their planting distances, the bluish posts supporting wires, slices through the landscape (15). These are the equivalent of the earlier evening diaries of the basket trips, a recording of time and place but also commentary, an artist's interpretation.



(15) 'Pruned Vine' Mary Butcher July 2006

This is a way of transforming my primary sources of photo, string and drawing into the beginnings of practice but still not for consumption. A further, monumental step remains – the further interpretation into final pieces for exhibition next year. These different interpretations so far have been entirely for myself. Preparation for public consumption comes between now and exhibition time. Work may not evolve directly from all these various field notes, but making them will govern what I do. Further ideas flow in when making starts, using the arrays of Italian materials now stacked in my workshop as beginnings. At this point all is between mind, hand and eye, the only notes being scribbled jottings of possible future directions that suggest themselves as my sampling progressed. This is a different kind of absorption and excitement.

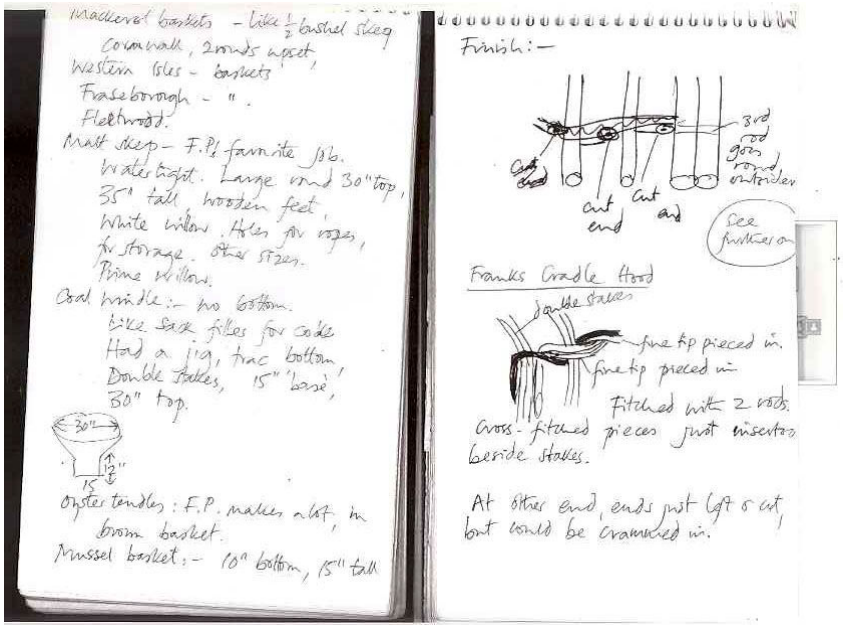
Tim Johnson, a sculpture and collaborator, for 8 years or so kept a series of field notes he calls 'walking books' (16).

(16)'Walking Books' Tim Johnson 1994-2002 (photo TJ)

The first started outside his house in Belfast, seeing what he could do with only a piece of paper. Pigment came from leaves, fruits, earth, fag ends, anything that was on his route. As a keen naturalist many of these books were based on bird watching trips and deep country. Latterly they became more urban with incorporation of found objects, folded leaves, old tickets and 3D objects found along the way. They include personal comment and names of species seen, some have comment from others also on the walk, some are the story of a day, some compiled over several weeks. They have become less purist latterly but all are the same format (17), a full size sheet of water colour paper torn into 3 and then folded, concertina style, into squares. This has not changed although the early ones were double sided as they were never meant for viewing. The later ones are also whole compositions, not single pages, but they remain a way of recording to bring a particular moment back into sharp focus and jog the memory. Now they have been replaced by bundles of plant materials, tight wads of wrapping to show colour and texture. For him too, the field note had become 3 D.

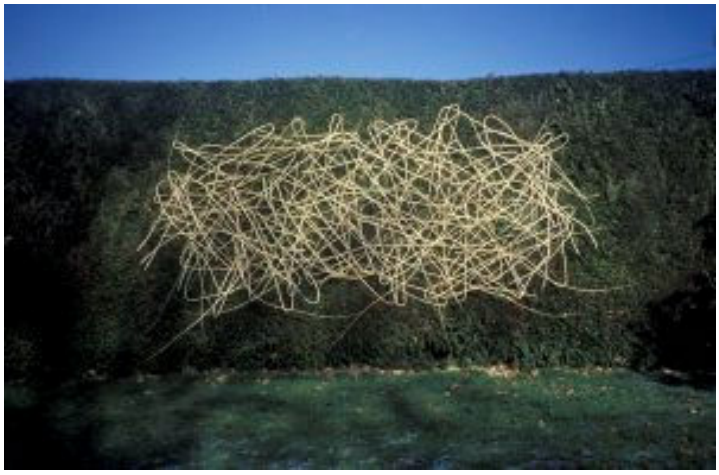
(17)‘Plant Bundles’ Tim Johnson 2002

With these kinds of artistic ‘fieldnote’, the photo, the diary, the plant strings and the first samples on paper, I am very much a part of the process, previous experience being germane to the result. Previous basket recording involves trying to exclude preconceptions or rapid conclusions based on existing knowledge. As an artist the weight of past practice has a bearing on the results. I would like now to go back and see how today’s students receive their training in scientific fieldwork, to see if there are set ways of recording for different areas of conclusion. Would that enable me also to go back and use what I have to produce new interpretations of what I have seen or would it all be merely invalidated?



The way I now make field notes (above), only dealing with what interests me most, provides an excitement with the recording process itself. It does not seem to have the responsibilities of earlier work, either to the scientific community or to the basketmakers I am visiting. No less rigorous in many ways it has a great freedom for self-expression, the consumer being

secondary to the self. And even the act of writing in the notebooks over many years has resulted in calligraphic artistic expression (18).



(18)'Willow Scribble Tracing', Mary Butcher, Cambridge University Botanic Garden 2002 (photo Howard Rice)

These latter processes I plan continue for as long as possible.

Mary Butcher
Artist Basketmaker
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