

Essay

Worldbuilding with Drawing and Words, an ‘Unproductive’ Counter to the Consumer-Driven, Extractive Models in Higher Education and the Cultural and Creative Industries

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Abstract

Antonopoulou and Dare’s ongoing collaborative projects (Phi Books 2008: ongoing; Digital Dreamhacker 2013: ongoing) enact an open-ended, experimental set of slow ‘Fictioning’ practices and actions that involve performing, diagramming, or assembling to create or anticipate new modes of existence. In this paper, the authors use the visual essay form to evidence how their daily practices of drawing, writing, and exchanging, position art and the artist. These practices unfold without, in this case, the utilitarian, economic, and epistemic priorities and systems of reductive representation which underpin the extractive models of Generative AI and other ‘innovative’ intermediaries, systems which expedite content and regulate consumption in the cultural and creative industries and in ‘arts and humanities’ education. Focusing on their creative practices, Antonopoulou and Dare reposition commodified notions of productivity, creativity, and innovation, seeking what Haraway describes as a way ‘of making, thinking and worlding’ beyond the neoliberal imperatives of extracting profit from labour. Positioned within an era of escalating precarity combined with ecological and political instability driven by extractive colonialism, the temporality of collaboration and drawing over decades is proposed as an act of material resistance to art’s subsumption into the venture capitalist hype cycles. Such cycles are associated with an accelerating array of crises, discussed here.

Keywords: writing; materiality; drawing; worldbuilding; unproductivity; arts education

1. Introduction

AA. ED: All will be explained. Slow down. Be patient. Nothing will be clear. But we will do our best to explain an arts practice and research conversation that has gone on for nearly 18 years. We wrote this paper as we write everything else. We agree that we will write together, each of us writes things that occupy our heads and bodies without showing much to each other, and then we weave them together. As in our first paper in 2009, we write this as a script with AA and ED as the actors (maybe it is a performance of some sort). (Figure 1).



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Figure 1. *THE PHI BOOKS: Research territories through narrative.* Alexandra Antonopoulou, Eleanor Dare, from a presentation, 2008.

ED: Since 2008, we have seen the world engulfed by neoliberalism, boom and bust Ponzi Scam economics and AI slop (Hern and Milmo 2024) accelerating enshittification (the American Dialect Society’s 2023 Word of the Year describes how ‘platforms decay and why they are all collapsing at once’ harvard.edu Doctorow and Munroe 2024) and a general sense of academic decay to a rotting mush of badly done recruitment adverts and ChatGPT derived marketing spin. This is half a joke. I believe in education, but education does not believe in me. I believe in art, but art and artists are being beaten up by Google (see Roberts 2025) and the rest of the Big Tech/managerialist bullies. I agree with Donna Haraway, who wrote about the coming into being of something ‘unexpected, something new and free, something outside the rules of function and calculation, something not ruled by the logic of reproduction of the same’ (Haraway 2008, p. 223). This is what I see in *The Phi Books*, a breakout from the era of slop on demand, differences not tamed by taxonomy (Figure 2).

ED: Since we started *The Phi Books* project in 2008 (Antonopoulou and Dare 2008, 2012, 2022; Dare et al. 2022), it goes without saying that a lot has changed. Humans love to say this, but it feels as if the changes between 2008 and 2025 have been greater than those between the year of my birth, 1965, and 2008. Life in all its forms now seems perilous and cruel, for many of us, but not least the Global Majority. On borders (which we wrote about in *The Phi Books* on a highly subjective scale), Mbembe writes they are ‘no longer sites to be crossed but lines that separate. Within these more or less miniaturised and militarised spaces, everything is supposed to remain still. Many are those who, encountering them, now meet their ends or, when not simple victims of shipwrecks or electrocution, are deported’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 3). In the UK, we live in what seems like a form of pro-slavery democracy. Mbembe observes that such states are characterised by a bifurcation in which two ‘orders coexist within it—a community of fellow creatures governed, at least in principle, by the law of equality, and a category of non-fellows, or even of those without part, that is also established by law. A priori, those without part have no right to have rights. They are governed by the law of inequality. This inequality and the law establishing it, and that is its base, is founded on the prejudice of race. The prejudice itself, as much as the law founding it, enabled a practically unbridgeable distance to be upheld between the community of fellow creatures and its others. Pro-slavery democracy, supposing it to be a community, could only be a community of separation’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 17).

Armies of delivery drivers, fruit pickers, Amazon fulfilment staff, data processors, call centre and ghost workers occluded from tales of the ‘4th revolution’, service an economy and a country predicated on inequality spun into disingenuous hype and greenwashing. This is accompanied by an ever-growing commitment to embedding ‘AI’ in all aspects of government and education. How can art and art education survive in this context? I believe that fictioning and worlding have agency and serve as a counter force to the rise and imminent implosion of nationalism, neoliberalism, and sovereign slop.

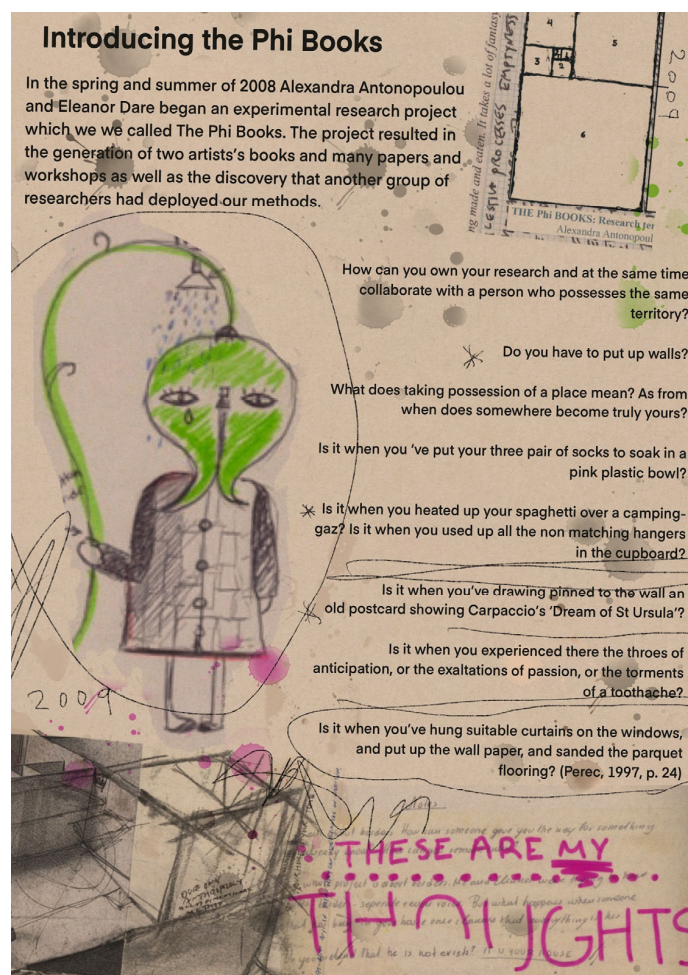


Figure 2. Introducing *The Phi Books*, read this, so we do not have to explain. Drawings and poetry.

2. Materials and Methods

ED: As Burrows and O'Sullivan state, 'pasts and futures are manifested and made coextensive through technics of looping and nesting, something that necessarily leads to the instantiation of layered narrative constructions and complex temporalities. . . We necessarily connect the summoning of a people with the idea that all times can be potentially manifested by (or through) different subjectivities, collectives, practices, and journeys (Burrows and O'Sullivan 2019, p. 6). Writing seeks a summoning for ourselves and others; in the ongoing process of creating *The Phi Books*, we have been encouraged to discover that other writers (see Corble et al. 2012) have used our methods and methodology to manifest different pasts and futures. The life of these Phi Books is looped and deeply nested, inherently intertextual to many other texts but also between the two Phi Book editions, one for each of us, which we swapped around and tried to break, repurpose, and hack into other forms. This, I hope, enacts an epistemological break, a looping non-linear path to something different from humanist framings of knowledge, innovation, 'smartness', and agency.

AA: During my annual leave, I uploaded a photo (Figure 3) on social media showing myself painting in a Greek landscape. In the past, I have noticed that simply mentioning I am in Greece often triggers assumptions among colleagues—as if I am enjoying myself in a paradise-like setting, a place of leisure and escape as opposed to work. Fun, enjoyment, and productivity seem to be mutually exclusive in such readings.



Figure 3. Photo of landscape and oil paintings on broken chairs by Antonopoulou, 2025.

This perception led me to think more deeply about painting as an unproductive concept. Within certain academic environments in the UK, productivity is increasingly measured through quantifiable engagement—the “clicks” of a computer, online visibility, or activity on Teams. By contrast, the act of painting would appear as digital inactivity and suspect waste of time, in such metrics.

In the image I shared, the paintings depict idyllic Greek landscapes, yet they are painted on the backs of broken chairs. My practice often revisits and reuses chairs to explore themes of power and hierarchy. These chair backs, painted with colourful landscapes, yet slowly being disintegrated by woodworms, stand as metaphors for cultures of power. The woodworms that eat through them quietly erode their structure, while in the meantime, they infest any other chair placed nearby. I was not thinking about working cultures when I painted them; however, the idea of one being infested by just being sat amongst infested positions of power lends itself to discussion.

Returning to the idea of painting as unproductivity, on one hand, I see it as a critical stance against neoliberal definitions of labour and value. In such frameworks, activities carried out “in one’s free time”—especially those associated with pleasure—are deemed less legitimate, less valuable. At a recent art open studio I took part in, someone commented that I could not charge much for work produced during my leisure, since it was not part of my “job.” The message for me was clear: labour outside official working hours, performed in flip-flops rather than office shoes, cannot hold real economic or institutional value.

Yet the act of painting, making, and drawing is a practice that, although I do enjoy it, requires time, knowledge, and capability—a ritual demanding commitment and preparation. Moreover, it is an important methodology for understanding the world and, as I had argued before, for producing new knowledge (Antonopoulou 2017). It is a process that

cannot always be translated into words; it is fluid, with multimodal representations and interpretations that cannot easily be extracted. Although it requires sustained investment and labour, perhaps keeping on painting, beyond the grid of measurable productivity, but in a safe space that allows capacity to reflect, is the most productive thing for me.

This unofficial construct of productivity has led me to always keep my colours and paper close at hand, wherever I am—from a tea in a pub to my recent fieldwork. I draw what I see and what I sense; through drawing, a door opens for words to form and for critique to emerge. During my research fieldwork, I drew almost continuously, using drawing as an extended form of visual ethnography—a way to quickly record what I observed, producing memory-doodles to revisit at the end of each day. It is also a method of focusing my senses through colour and shape, of listening more closely to the communities I worked with and learnt from. Beyond that, it is a way to feel, to think, and to remain reflexive and critical about my positionality as a researcher and ways of learning within a Global South context.

ED: Enshittification and immiseration, the law of increasing misery conceived of by Marx (1976) and situated in its ongoing concentration of deathworlds as described by Mbembe, go hand in hand. Their looming presence strengthens my commitment to drawing every day as an act of resistance to the spreadsheet and the prompt engineer, the hot desk and the productivity review. The extinction of non-billionaire life. Drawing slows us down, beyond the reach of the value proposition and the strategy app. I draw quickly, but the act of looking and being with the marks and textures is a go-slow. It takes time, maybe sixty years to complete one drawing. It's not an API, drawing-as-a-service, or a multisided platform. Of course, drawings may be distributed over many separate acts and occasions, but drawing is a longitudinal, densely connected network of situated processes and events. I still think about the drawings and sculptures I made when I was three years old. I do not own them, but I possess them; they possess me and bubble up again and again through my hand and onto the paper. Into a lifeworld. Into *The Phi Books* (Figure 4).

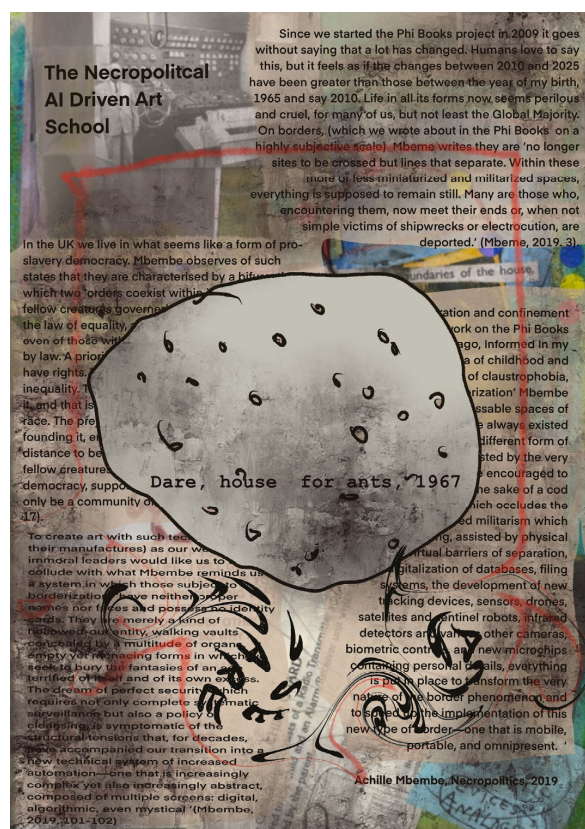


Figure 4. A house for ants, based on a memory of drawing and making from 1967, Dare, 2025.

3. Results

AA: It is very interesting to revisit the original Phi Books we made in 2008, almost 18 years ago, when we were PhD students. We were thinking about authorship, practice-based research, methods of interdisciplinary collaboration, story-making, drawing, and we were eager to write and draw as a process of discovery and having fun. I was excited to offer my thoughts, my drawings, my spirit, and my enthusiasm wholeheartedly. I wanted to share, meet with Eleanor, and find ways to work with others from different disciplines. I was offering my labour, helping others, and others did the same.

There was precarity back then, but in different forms. We were both at Goldsmiths, having been awarded extremely competitive scholarships, and on the side, we both had small, fractional academic permanent contracts or hourly paid positions here and there. I was travelling to Newcastle, working on research projects with computer scientists. I obtained a bit of a Geordie accent back then. Other times, I was commuting to Southampton, teaching illustration, games, and art, and running short courses in London on the weekends. I was also teaching at Goldsmiths, and I worked at the Interaction Research Studio; I still remember the smell in the Lime Grove office where we had the meetings with the 'Technology Education Research Studio' team. It seemed like I was perhaps the only non-British PhD holder at that time who had managed to consistently teach in my department for more than six years, and as part of this, I had the right to become a permanent lecturer. I had not noticed this back then, but I notice it now. I also notice the many spelling mistakes in the Phi book stories I wrote back then. The spelling mistakes remind me with nostalgia that I was a foreigner who felt at home in the UK. I was classified as a 'home student' back then. It is bizarre to think that if I were coming to study in the UK now, I would be considered a migrant who needs a visa, let alone that my EU scholarship would not allow me to study in the UK nowadays.

I am happy I chose to study at Goldsmiths at that particular time, and it is a place I still care for deeply; it allowed me to teach, make, draw, and play ping pong with Eleanor. We invented a research method by playing ping pong in the Hilly Fields ([Dare and Antonopoulou 2022](#)). We met anywhere that was walking distance; we lived in precarious accommodation, but with a bit of problem-solving, we managed. Problem-solving worked back then, but I feel that these times were quite different compared to what we currently experience as academics. The shift in how academia operates is reviewed in Peter Fleming's book *Dark Academia*, which carefully maps the shift in universities from places of knowledge production to corporate neoliberal environments where 'a stereotypical employer' stands 'over its workers shaking a stick' ([Fleming 2021](#), p. 12).

I remember clearly that, when we were doctoral students, there were funding opportunities not only for staff and our supervisors, but also for postgraduate students. For example, through the funded inter-art programme, all PhD students had the chance to rotate visits to partner institutions in Berlin, Stockholm, Copenhagen, and the UK, where we tested, spread, and experimented with our ideas. It was all part of our education. An education that trained us to become academics who read, innovate, present, and test their work; scholars who work hard, but part of their work entails having the capacity to meet fellow academics from other countries and disciplines, think, work, and produce knowledge collaboratively.

From 2008, when I started working with Eleanor, until 2012, we had a network of colleagues (doctoral students then) all over Europe. We felt we belonged to this group; we were looking forward to meeting them while rotating visits to each other's institutions. We were testing our ideas, curating exhibitions, and learnt about each other's research. At one point, Eleanor and I pretended that we locked them all in a room to test the idea of ethics, consent, and participation ([Antonopoulou and Dare 2016](#)). We published academic papers

as performances, created installations and soundscapes with reverberations of practice-based research. We ate together, went to flea markets, and partied at night. Professor Helen Carr, an incredible scholar who inspired us all, was even initiating stretching exercises during our inter-art symposia.

While such kinaesthetic ways of learning and intellectually stimulating trips and communities were once a core part of our education, today, within what Fleming (2021) calls the neoliberal university, such practices would likely be dismissed under the false narrative “that scholars lead a decidedly privileged existence, leisurely writing books, discussing esoteric topics in tweed jackets and sipping brandy in the evening as they contemplate complex problems. Academia is considered an abstruse, yet gilded occupation. Whatever professors do in those ivory towers, they certainly have little to complain about—a conclusion that unfortunately resonates in these anti-intellectual times.

The contradiction between this dreamy picture of scholarly life and the dark reality wreaking havoc in universities today remains pervasive” (Fleming 2021, p. 25) (Figure 5).

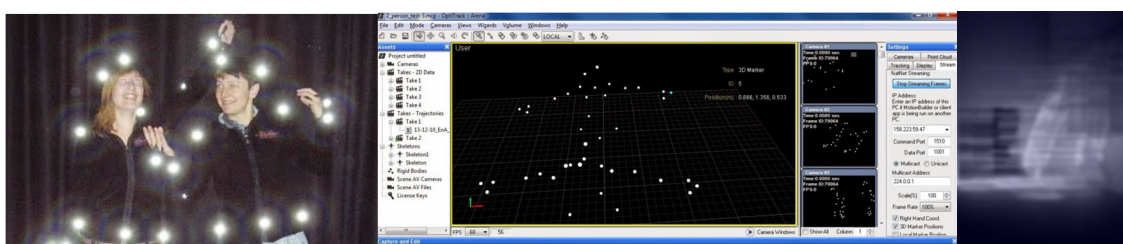


Figure 5. Antonopoulou and Dare from a presentation at Berlin Free University, 2009.

Eleanor finished her PhD first, in 2011, and stayed as a lecturer soon after, in the Department of Computing. I finished mine just after we established the ‘PhD by Design’ Conference—a student-led conference on practice-based PhDs. Since then, we both have both been working non-stop in research and teaching, often on precarious contracts, giving our best to our students and constantly studying ourselves. I bet that by now we both have more than three Master’s, the PhDs, and fragmented pension schemes from all the institutions we taught at. Another PhD colleague of mine, a good friend and collaborator, was awarded two PhDs; he never mentioned it. I found out when I searched for his profile one day. What I am trying to highlight is that our labour as students and academics is labour that comes from curiosity, care, and valuing knowledge. I know that none of us ever felt the need to talk about our degrees, and even writing about them in this paper makes me feel uneasy. I discussed this with Eleanor, and I had to really think about why I mentioned them.

Moten and Harney (2013), in *The Undercommons*, powerfully articulate the relationship between the professionalisation of academia and negligence. I partly align with their idea of professionalisation as negligence, in the sense that within the modern university context, “professional standards” often may shift the focus from capability, knowledge, and process—the very elements that slow, continuous study nurtures—towards what one could describe as the neoliberal professional academic who is required to tick the metrics’ boxes. I can imagine an exaggerated image of this figure as a persona packaged with catchy phrases, often “borrowed” from colleagues’ or ideas generated by AI; a “stakeholder” (in commercial terms) who knows how to navigate the neoliberal university and secure promotion by often mastering “divide and conquer” tactics under the guise of “strategic networking.” Although I wrote this with a tone of playful and speculative cynicism, one needs to consider that commodification in academia has reached a point where specialised academic recruiters earn a living by being ‘creative industries’ intermediaries between universities, which advertise senior management jobs with competitive salaries, and candi-

dates, who have to negotiate, mediate, and ‘package’ their value. This often results in what Fleming (2021, p. 12) describes as ‘a detached cadre of managers’ who ‘circulate within the higher education industry, moving from institution to institution, having little in common with the scholars they oversee’. Fleming (2021, p. 8) also notes that ‘in many institutions, senior executives have no PhDs and have been trained in business or the military instead. Mindless performance targets dominate teaching and research to the point of caricature, designed by functionaries who have never taught a class or written a research article in their lives. Unfortunately, these hierarchies have become notoriously bossy. Coercion rather than volition compels much academic labour today. Being aware of the mechanics that such ‘corporate deals’ operate, my earlier reference to degrees was perhaps a desperate attempt to re-establish some basic quality mechanisms—ways of distinguishing the academic who has the knowledge, learning drive, and scholarship from what Fleming describes as neoliberal university managers.

Almost 17 years after we wrote *The Phi Books*, practice-based research is well established, and interdisciplinary research is a part of large funding agendas such as the EU and UK Research and Innovation (UKRI). I got successful as Co-I in the first ‘UKRI cross-research council responsive mode scheme’ only because I kept on working with other disciplines—this is what I was taught that we do in academia. I realised early on in my PhD that it is when I work with people from other disciplines that I feel at home; this is because there is always something new to learn from them. As I have written before when working with other disciplines I am ‘moving in and out of my different hats’ as “a researcher, a teacher, a designer, a story-maker” dwelling in “a state of liminality”. I am being “forgiven” for acting in an “unorthodox” way in a similar way that children are forgiven for their “naivety” or an immigrant for their language slips”. In-between disciplines, I am able to “subvert the common perception of what these roles are” (Antonopoulou 2017, p. 85).

The image below (Figure 6) is an image that shows one of my drawings and writings from *The Phi Books*. Eleanor selected it, and I was reminded of it. It shows a torn page with a warning note: ‘these are my thoughts, do not enter’, but I can’t remember if I tore the page; I do not think that Eleanor would have done it. Drawing and making often include these moments and actions, and their intention is forgotten in time; the torn page remains just an imagined gesture and an image showing that there is forced access to my private space and thoughts. Many years later, during my ‘MA in Academic Practice’, which was a degree funded by my HE employer, I returned to this idea of drawing and making as a private space. As part of this, I wrote an essay on finding spaces of respite and creativity in academia, places (physical or psychological) that one can hide and do what they enjoy; places where one can shut everyone outside and reset themselves through making. I have had the urge to have my own creative space since I was a child. Looking at the image below, I feel that painting, making, and writing stories is still my sanctuary and home. Unlike most Greek homes that are open to all, I feel that this is a space that I want to keep for myself and the select few I invite. In 2008, Eleanor had written in *The Phi Books* that her terraced Phi house reflects the cliché of an ‘Englishman’s Home as their Castle’. Now, in my capacity as a British citizen, I can say the same for my creative space that I safeguard dearly.

I read the above with a bit of mischief and a hint of sarcasm to Eleanor, and she asked me to explain a bit more. Even though I am officially a British citizen, I feel that I have been, for many years, living in what Anzaldúa (2009, p. 243) describes as *Nepantla*: an “in-between space, an unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition space lacking clear boundaries. (. . .) Living in this liminal zone means being in a constant state of displacement—an uncomfortable, even alarming feeling.” I hold my UK passport in my hands with a sense of stability, yet I often wonder whether I have escaped *Nepantla*. Many of us still feel unsettled by the constant changes and restructures within academia. As an

immigrant who was once a student, I remain acutely aware of how international students are viewed—at once as customers and as immigrants. Moreover, the fact that, as academics, we are responsible for reporting student attendance to ensure that our students comply with visa regulations continually transports me back to a space where displacement feels like an ever-present possibility. Anzaldúa observes that “most of us dwell in Nepantla so much of the time it has become a sort of ‘home’” (Anzaldúa 2009, p. 243). Perhaps what I was trying to say is that I often feel that the only safe home for me exists within my creative space.

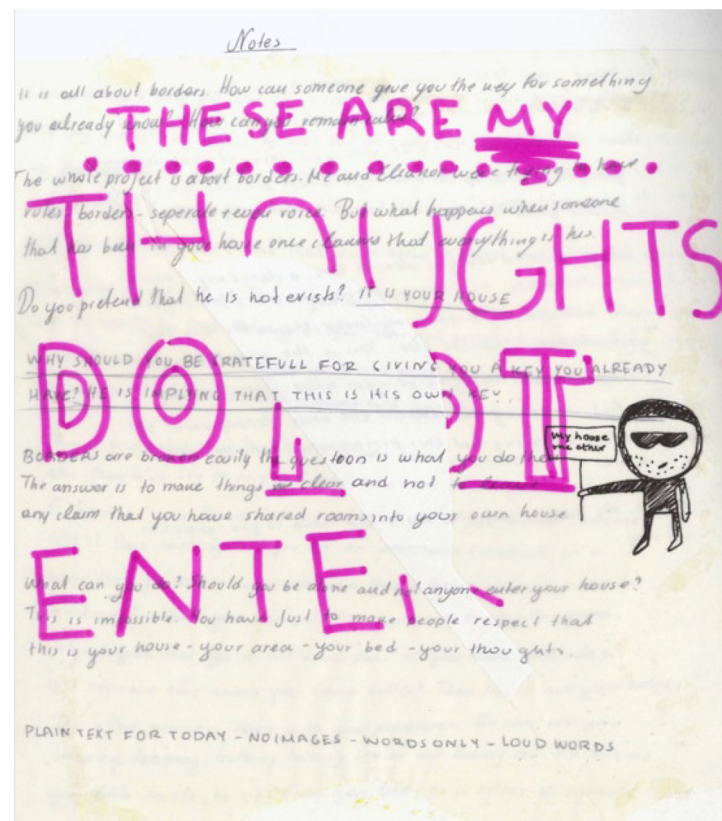


Figure 6. *The Phi Books*, drawings and writing by Antonopoulou, 2008.

ED: Themes of separation, precarity, and confinement emerged in our work on *The Phi Books* from sixteen years ago, informed in my case, by the trauma as well as the sensory and intellectual wonder of childhood, and an enduring sense of claustrophobia, but not by the ‘borderization’ Mbembe speaks of. Though I see now how a different form of bifurcation has emerged, one that is entangled with managerial dreams of automation, not least in the AI-enamoured art school’s ‘leadership’. In the context Mbembe writes of, ‘impassable spaces of loss and mourning’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 99) have always existed, but we see now a different form of escalation, assisted by the very technologies we are encouraged to deploy in our art and design teachings for the sake of a cod ‘innovation’ dogma which occludes the reality of corporatised militarism which is in full swing. Mbembe reminds us:

‘Physical and virtual barriers of separation, digitalization of databases, filing systems, the development of new tracking devices, sensors, drones, satellites and sentinel robots, infrared detectors and various other cameras, biometric controls, and new microchips containing personal details, everything is put in place to transform the very nature of the border phenomenon and to speed up the implementation of this new type of border—one that is mobile, portable, and omnipresent. Migrants and refugees are thus not, as it stands, the main focus of the argument’ (Mbembe 2019, p. 101).

UK art schools like to separate and borderise their citizens in a middle class but leaky taxonomy, between the permanent and the temporary, the administrator and the manager, the teacher and the researcher, the security guard and the porter, the gardener and the cleaner, all but the highest in the taxonomy/hierarchy are dizzyingly contracted and recontracted amidst vague threats and headspinning incompetence. When that fails, as crass technocratisation always does, they abolish the current taxonomy and ChatGPT up a new one. This might encompass the abolition of reading and writing or the implementation of swingeing punishments for not using AI to combat AI cheating. No one can second-guess this system of prescribed incoherence. As Moten and Harney put it:

‘To work today is to be asked, more and more, to do without thinking, to feel without emotion, to move without friction, to adapt without question, to translate without pause, to desire without purpose, to connect without interruption’ (Moten and Harney 2013, p. 49) (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Drawing and writing by Dare, 2025.

‘I’m alone again. It is night time in the termini; the word doesn’t amuse me now. I’m frightened of the night shadows and sounds. I must have slept for several hours, as time has telescoped into this blackout. I can’t see any edges; my own edges are dissolving into the unknown, the nameless in the dark. A nest of itchy fibres has formed around me; if I stay here any longer, I’ll be suffocated by it. Ghost animals scurry around the nest. Revenants or bitter spirits of the returning dead whisper in both my ears. I try to memorise their words, in case they are significant to me. Perhaps I have remembered ten percent of the utterances they

emptied into my head. The first voice said, ‘The past is more of who we are than the present’, and it was followed by others. The sentences I remember most clearly are as follows:

- 1: The past is more of who we are than the present [Professorial]
- 2: Maman died today. Or yesterday maybe, I don’t know [Weepy]
- 3: No, nothing matters. [Rasping]
- 4: Weekday Blitz Challenge 11:30 a.m. and IPM [Voracious]
- 5: Circumference of head. . . that’s minuscule [Terrified]
- 6: Ventouse doesn’t bruise [Indifferent]
- 7: Indicating cephalhaematoma? [Self-important]

I almost laughed when it dawned on me how they resemble a disturbing variation on Cinderella’s seven dwarves: Professorial, Weepy, Rasping, Voracious, Terrified, Indifferent, and Self-important, quite a gathering.

Beside me, there’s a sudden point of light like burning embers. I focus, and rub my eyes, now I can see quite clearly: It is a keyhole, not more than fifteen feet from my nest bed. I pull the key out of my pocket and feel my way towards the radiating light. Upon pushing the key into the lock and twisting it leftwards, the door swings open.”

ED: Art school (and the rest of academia and my own life, come to think of it) is more and more like Borges’s Library of Babel (Borges 2000). I see it in the architecture and the axiological incoherence and a kow-towing to LLM technologies, which threaten to end our capacity to learn (see Monett and Paquet 2025; Kosmyna et al. 2025) or even to teach. To create art with such technologies (and their gas-guzzling effects) as so many of our hallucinating HE leaders would like us to do is to collude with what Mbembe reminds us is a system in which those subject to borderisation have neither proper names nor faces and possess no identity cards. They are merely a kind of hollowed-out entity, walking vaults concealed by a multitude of organs, empty yet menacing forms in which we seek to bury the fantasies of an age terrified of itself and of its own excess. The dream of perfect security, which requires not only complete systematic surveillance but also a policy of cleansing, is symptomatic of the structural tensions that, for decades, have accompanied our transition into a new technical system of increased automation—one that is increasingly complex yet also increasingly abstract, composed of multiple screens: digital, algorithmic, even mystical (Mbembe 2019, pp. 101–2). To deploy AI systematically within Art and Design education is to deploy the fantasy of perfect efficiency, security, and surveillance, which breeds totalitarian art and a morally deranged, cruelly benighted HE hegemony (there is no citation for this observation; it is experiential and constantly lived) (Figure 8).

ED: In this context, my ritual of drawing every day may seem innocuous, but in the contemporary neoliberal arts university, it’s an act of defiance, maybe even a sackable breach of contract. I mean, where’s the business case? Did you get permission from one of the college’s 300 business consultants? Of course, this may seem like a stupid or even ludicrous situation, but that’s where we are in neoliberal dystopia. What hope is there for the arts in this era of monotonous, dreary ‘innovation’? The good news is that some of us don’t internalise the delusions of adequacy nurtured by our great HE ‘thought leaders’. Have you noticed they are all experts on ‘AI’ now? Though they know zilch about it and wouldn’t differentiate a transformer from a mackerel if it slapped them in the face, never mind. As long as they’re the ones who get to destroy arts education, they’ll be happy.

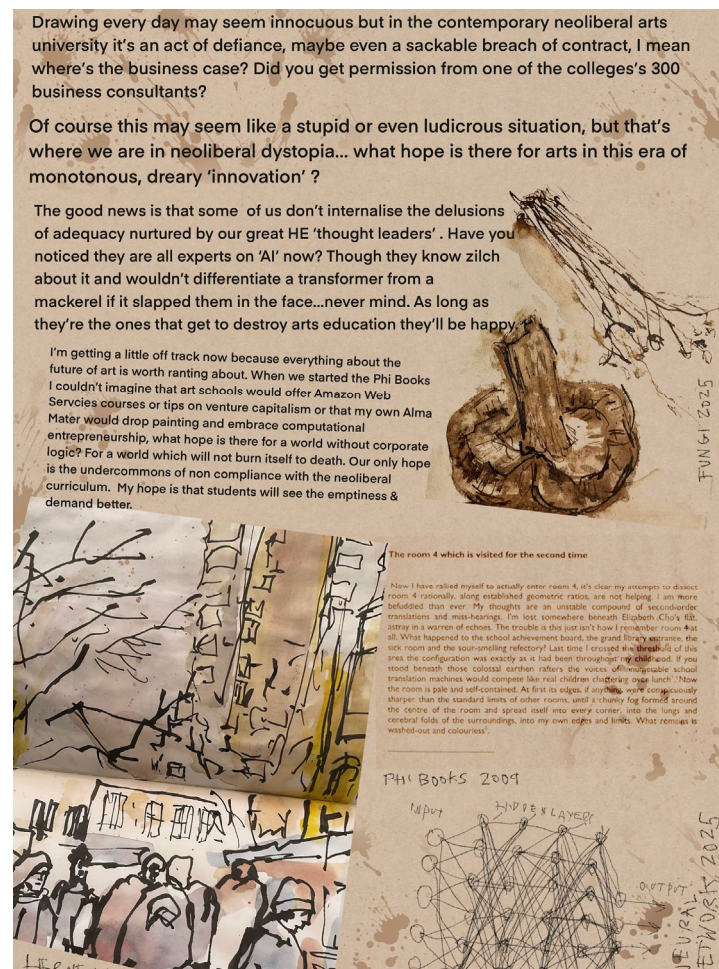


Figure 8. Drawing and writing by Dare, 2025.

ED: I'm getting a little off track now because everything about the future of art education is worth ranting about. When we started *The Phi Books*, I couldn't imagine that art schools would offer Amazon Web Services courses or tips on venture capitalism or that my own Alma Mater would drop an array of core arts subjects and instead embrace computational entrepreneurship. What hope is there for a world without corporate logic? For a world that will not burn itself to death. Our only hope is the undercommons (Moten and Harney 2013) of noncompliance with the neoliberal curriculum. My hope is that students will see the emptiness and demand better.

ED: I've had years of overproductivity, driven by unachievable goals set by managers with zero commitment to the sanity of their staff. These goals have not even been worth remembering; they are far removed from the decades of drawing and writing, which mean more than any probationary meeting or performance review ever could. But events have recently brought me so much waiting time, enough to really think about what it means to have had a life of drawing, since this is an activity included in my earliest memories. Time also to think about the opposite of drawing, the image and text on demand services of recent times, which require zero patience and zero understanding, zero material knowledge beyond conjuring up a customer order and assuming the passive role of a corporate consumer. Alexandra and I have had a long time to think about art and collaboration and its connection to place, health, work, housing, and relationships. Like Han (2015), I have also had many years to grasp the negative impact of excessive managerialism and 'efficiency', which in the context of art school is a philistine affront to the knowledge of materials and their indeterminacy (Figure 9).

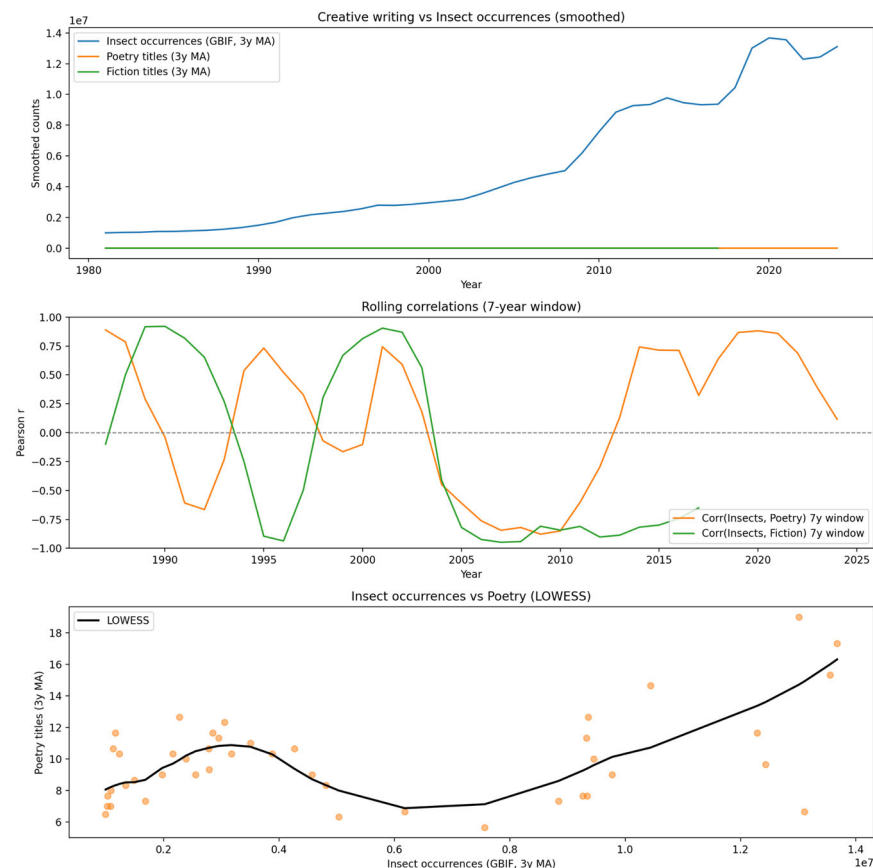


Figure 9. Creative writing and insect populations with complex correlations. Annual publication counts for poetry and fiction from Open Library and insect occurrence data from GBIF, combined for no reason other than that dreary STEM ideology demands some data analysis in a paper. Dare, 2025.

ED: In the UK, many arts schools are under threat, usually from the people who run them; the warnings have been there for some time (Dare 2022). More recently, Dillon (2024) wrote that the ‘UK’s arts education crisis is about to get even worse’. Many of our colleagues have been given redundancy notices, while Universities seem uncritically enamoured with the very corporations that threaten the jobs of Art and Design graduates (unless they want low-paid jobs in data centres or the obfuscating allure of a ‘Universal Income’, which is the tech billionaire’s term for mass unemployment). In *The Phi Books*, the machines we drew seemed less voracious than the war machines that are flattening and eating our culture today. This voracious guzzling enables the training of essentialised models which can never obtain enough data; they smash and grab our data in collusion with institutions that can never take enough from us. The Phi Machines are innocent of this degree of power or brutality, but they foreshadow a pathway from precarity to carceral AI. The prison tower was a key image in my pages, and the need for privacy and space was a recurring theme in Alexandra’s work. The privacy horse has now well and truly bolted: data-driven corporations such as Palantir have been granted access to our most intimate NHS data, while other firms, such as Google and Meta, just take what they want and create new models to sell our data back to us. One day, *The Phi Books* will be mangled and thrown back to us as averaged probable pages via the ‘AI-assisted’ search machine that no one can work out how to turn off.

ED: Siegfried Zielinski and Gloria Custance observed that “in the relations between the arts, sciences, and technologies, there have been just as many hot phases as ice-cold ones. According to my observations, the temperature of these relations describes a wave-form that propagates approximately every 200 years” (Zielinski and Custance 2011, p. 295),

but it seems that Big Tech Corporations now have the potential to destroy science as well as the arts and arts education (all education, perhaps) and have the intention to do so in collaboration with their far right friends. We have witnessed the Trump administration all but shutting down the Department of Education in 2025 and slashing serious research under the chain saw of Elon Musk. It is not hard to envisage a nightmare scenario in which Musk's self-proclaimed Fascist chat bot 'Grok' replaces teachers on a very significant scale (it has already been given lucrative defence contracts) and even easier to see that as a general far right ambition to destroy the arts and the empirical sciences (on the arts see [Folco 2025](#), and on science and data see [Cohen 2025](#)) and more depressing to see the supposed left falling for this, such as Keir Starmer and Tony Blair (whose son coincidentally runs an AI entangled 'skills' company). See also [Stadler \(2025\)](#), who writes, 'The U.S. Supreme Court recently allowed the Trump administration to move forward with dismantling the federal Department of Education, clearing the way for mass firings and the displacement of education programmes to other agencies'. Of course, we also know the Trump administration, in addition to dismantling the US Department of Education, seeks to shut down or at least financially eviscerate universities such as Harvard and Columbia, as well as arts organisations (see [Helmore 2025](#)).

ED: The Overton Window of previously unthinkable, casual acts of infrastructural vandalism and grievous bodily violence has been opened so far that many people no longer seem to think such things are worth commenting upon. At least I notice many senior colleagues in Higher Education and in Art and Design (particularly design) seem to have no comment to make about the entanglement of supposedly creative technologies with military action (we know ChatGPT is apparently being used/was used in the war in Gaza, we know Microsoft are deeply involved (see [Davies and Abraham 2025](#))), we know Musk is a far right agitator interfering in UK politics, how is this reconcilable with even the most minimal core values? Do we just accept that the technologies and corporations we procure in arts and design education and 'innovative' curation may also be killing civilians, including, of course, students and children?

ED: In 2022, Phillips wrote, the 'emergence of practice-based/led/driven/informed ... research was forced by the process of academisation of art and design. This was made manifest in the UK following the slow absorption into polytechnics through the 1970s, and in 1992, by the University system gobbling up art colleges as a whole. As a consequence, both swallower and swallowee have suffered from indigestion; universities still have that surprised look a python has when trying to swallow a deer twice its diameter, and the partially digested remains of art college struggle to remember what they once were: places where 'you did not have to cohere, it was the incoherence that was exciting and fruitful' ([Phillips 2022](#), p. 194). The projection of a business ontology onto the messy and often non-linear processes of art, in addition to clunky attempts at metricisation or measurement of art, has, in part, become a new ontology for art. As Phillips reminds us, the way we measure gets to define the thing that is measured, 'not least the impact of measuring things that are easy-to-measure on the future development of artistic and cultural forms. If the educational framework, inception, commissioning, development, curation, and dissemination of artistic and cultural works are defined by short-term measures, the chains of influence and value will be diminished. Some things are hard to quantify' ([Phillips 2022](#), p. 198). Yet measuring is all that many universities seem to really get behind, albeit very badly, and in the case of rankings, well, I guess the excuse is that everyone is number one at something? I take heart from what Moten and Harney wrote back in 2013: 'show me a business innovation, and I will show you a worker's rebellion' ([Moten and Harney 2013](#), p. 50).

4. Conclusions

ED: There is no conclusion to this discussion and practice of either *The Phi Books* or this paper or the wider question of what will happen to the arts; hence the brevity of a section which makes little sense in the context of intractable ontological mismatches. We have reached a stage in Arts Education and wider HE where anything might happen—a takeover of all education by far-right AI corporations seeking to destroy both art and science, or a backlash in which the analogue arts and the climate crisis become our national and international priorities. I hope for the latter, and for the ability to exist as an artist resisting AI, as I believe it is our duty to do, for the sake of all life on Earth and for the future of the arts and sciences.

AA: Eleanor had left gaps for me in a document to write in between her equally spaced paragraphs, but I wanted her voice to flow. So, I am adding my voice here. I was promised by Eleanor that this is a paper where we can write what we want or just add our drawings. We did not write this strategically to either fit in the next REF (Research Excellence Framework) submission, or to conduct an analysis of labour in the Cultural and Creative Industries. However, we somehow talk about what we truly believe that excellence in education and the ‘cultural and creative industries’ should stand for. We offer our labour for free to write this paper, and I think we do this with the spark that is left in us from the two young researchers we once were at Goldsmiths; two researchers and artists that still want to meet during the weekends and work with one another.

Eleanor put some images in a drive and reminded me of this story I had written in *The Phi Books*. The story goes:

“I want to tell you something very specific. It is about the man who is wearing his watch above his shirt, but for now, I want to tell you a couple of thoughts before I forget. (309 words)

This is Martin, a doll I found in an open-air market in Copenhagen. She is a girl, but I gave her a boy’s name. Martin exists, and he is a bearded boy. Martin, my doll, has got a hole in her neck that grows bigger and bigger. I like her. (She is) kind of disabled, (she) feels more unique, I love her more because of that hole in her neck.”

I just wonder how Martin, who has a hole in her neck, is doing nowadays (Figures 10 and 11).



Figure 10. Drawing by Antonopoulou, 2008.



Figure 11. Drawing and writing by Dare, 2025.

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