

IF WE KNEW WHAT WE WERE DOING...

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The title of this article is the first part of a quote by Albert Einstein, which concludes, "... it wouldn't be called research would it?"¹ It seemed particularly apt in the context of research through art, especially within the current climate in schools of art where researchers are required to address real-world issues and relate research topics to those prescribed by the university. How do we relate our work as artists to problems and concerns in the world?

My interest in this subject is informed by my experiences as an artist-academic. I am a practicing, exhibiting artist and academic with an expectation to produce accountable research outcomes and to apply for research income. In arguing that art can contribute to new knowledge and offer new ways of imagining and encountering the world, I will partly reflect upon my own experience as an artist and a researcher and I will also look to the work and ideas of other artists and to some of the current thinking about research through art.

Returning to the title of this article, "If we knew what we were doing ...," I would like to consider what it is that artists can bring to research and reveal as knowledge through their, often, idiosyncratic methodologies. Artists enter into many projects with eyes metaphorically closed, diving in with no clear idea of the direction their work might take and opening up the problem or focus to possibility rather than probability. In a recent paper, Graeme Sullivan writes about the ways that imaginative insight can be constructed through a creative approach.² He considers the methods of more conventional forms of research, such as having clearly defined intentions or objectives derived through knowing what is already known or what has been done, to which he applies this "positivist mantra": "*if you don't know where you are going, how do you know when you get there?*"³ or, in other words, if you know what you are aiming for, then you will know when you have the answer: He says that this is how we construct probable theory. Alternatively, plausible theory, according to Sullivan, is constructed when knowledge is explored as a difference in kind or quality, and can be summed up in the maxim, "*if you don't know where you are going, then it is best to surround a problem in order to solve it.*"⁴ Neither of these paths, Sullivan suggests, is appropriate to the ways we go about research as artists, and he posits an alternative maxim: "*if you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there.*"⁵ In this way, Sullivan argues, we are able to construct possibility rather than seeing enquiry as linear or an enclosing process. He claims that, "research acts can also be interactive and reflexive whereby imaginative insight is constructed from creative and critical practice. Oftentimes what is known can limit the possibility of what is not and this requires a creative act to see things from a new view."⁶

ART AS KNOWING OR THE ART OF NOT-KNOWING

According to G Refsum, the condition of "not-knowing" is familiar to many artists and may even be considered to be a necessary condition for those who create.⁷ By citing this remark I do not mean to imply that artists only create in an unconscious or unthinking way, but that there are gaps that cannot be accounted for in the intersecting network of ideas, thoughts, images and experiences that combine in the creation of artwork. Unlike more conventional forms of research, creative work does not necessarily adhere to objectivity or follow a linear process, and methodology is difficult to determine if it cannot allow for the unpredictable or the ways that art often emerges out of a playful engagement with materials and media. Rather than knowing which road to take, an artist may simply set off and by not-knowing become interested in things.

Although I commenced a PhD having a clearly defined project, in reality and with the benefit of hindsight, it was an immensely speculative investigation. My project was to investigate ways in which atmospheric phenomena, or the conditions of the weather; permeate our lives and condition the ways we see the world both as a physical exterior and as an internalised mental process. An important consideration in my project was my own experiential relationship to the environment; how I experienced the natural world, especially the atmosphere, and how I consequently presented it in artwork to be re-experienced by a viewer. I use the phrase “the ways we see the world” deliberately to denote not only the physical act of looking, but also the relationship of seeing to perception, of using the senses to acquire information about one’s surroundings and sense of place. In the context of research it may seem incongruous to include the simple act of walking, but it turned out to be not only an essential activity through which I gathered information for my project but also the way in which I have continued my research.⁸

JUST LUCKY?

We have few examples regarding artists and their relation to research but, as more artist-academics in universities attain creative PhDs and continue to construct research projects within academia, it should become more mainstream and accepted, especially if artists are able to work in interdisciplinary groups. Some countries have already accepted that artists do research and welcome artists’ contributions, although there continues to be much debate about the nature of that contribution. In the United Kingdom for example, many artists are financially supported to research.

In 2005 the English artist Simon Starling was awarded the inaugural Cove Park Commission, which is a residency designed to support a period of artistic research rather than to commission a tangible outcome. Starling considers himself to be “just a lucky guy,” not only because he won the commission and was awarded the Turner Prize in the same year; but he is also “lucky” in the sense that, while researching, he creates fortuitous conditions that allow for unexpected and uncontrolled coincidences and chance findings to occur. The skill, he says, is in identifying them when they happen and realising their significance. In this way his approach to research is, as he describes it, very un-academic:

I mean it’s not structured in a way that would make sense within the normal understanding of academic research. It’s pretty shambolic, to be honest. It takes many, many forms. I mean, there is a degree of rooting round in libraries and that kind of thing, but it’s only one small part of the way that the research for each project develops.⁹

Starling goes on to explain the form his research takes: from a confusion of verbal information to things picked up in the pub and things stumbled upon by accident. He describes it as being like “a big Velcro-covered ball” to which some things stick and some fall off and then, out of nowhere, something suddenly becomes the key to the project – but, all in all, it is very difficult to explain: “so, yeah, it’s not a clear thing in any way, but it seems, it’s just the way it’s developed within the practice and it’s quite difficult to talk about because it’s so unformalised. But perhaps that’s true of everybody.”¹⁰

So, according to Starling, luck plays a part in research, but it is also something that he finds hard to put into words; as he describes it, “You just develop a nose for what might at some point be significant.”¹¹ He also articulates the ways in which luck also happens in the science laboratory, but that scientists don’t trust it – according to the conventions of scientific research they need to repeat it in order to verify it. Starling’s interviewer, Ross Birrell, describes his methodology as “knowing an instrument well enough in advance to allow you to improvise”¹² – many artists, on the other hand, trust their approach as speculative knowledge, a leap of faith; not knowing exactly where it’s going but trusting that the process will be worth it.

MELT

In 2008 I initiated *Melt*, a research project-as-exhibition designed to address the pertinent, real-world issues of climate change – the starting point being a long, isolated walk I made two years previously in an extreme environment. The 13-day walk in Baffin Island in the Canadian Arctic along glaciated river valleys – during which I waded across raging, icy torrents and traversed the nose of a glacier wearing crampons – not only kept me alert and acutely aware of my surroundings, but also afforded me time for reverie and unprovoked thoughts and imaginings. Consequently, when I embarked on the research for *Melt*,¹³ I drew upon both my physical and mental experiences of this extraordinary walk. I already had a curiosity about the ways that artists might address the topical issue of climate change, and I invited two artists who had been to Antarctica on New Zealand Antarctica Fellowships to join me to explore some of the associated issues through our individual personal experiences of the polar regions – areas which have become important barometers of the warming planet. We didn't collaborate, but our common intentions unified the disparate work.



Figure 1: View of Qikiqtarjuaq.



Figure 2: In the supermarket, Qikiqtarjuaq.



Figure 3: Polar bear skin, Qikiqtarjuaq.



Figure 4: Seal skin, Qikiqtarjuaq (images courtesy of the author).

To put my part of the project into context: before embarking on the walk, I spent some days in an Inuit community on a tiny island to the north of Baffin Island, waiting for the weather to improve enough to allow a safe boat journey up the fiord to the start of the walk. In Qikiqtarjuaq, I wandered among modern prefabricated houses and shopped in a supermarket that did not want for most of the goods one could find in the more civilised Canadian cities. But among the rows of foodstuffs and domestic items, I found animal skins and spare parts for skidoos. Between the

neat rows of houses hung enormous, gallows-like structures over which polar bear skins were drying and seal pelts were stretched on smaller frames leaning against walls close to doorways. Women squatted in the streets over fish and seals, gutting them and preserving every part. Despite the outward appearance of modernity, the inhabitants were steadfastly preserving their ancient culture and ways of living. My experience of my time in the Arctic was an amalgam of physical encounters with a harsh environment and with an indigenous population who had been adapting to these conditions for hundreds of years. On my return to Australia, I read extensively about the early Arctic explorers and the changing climatic conditions and considered all these facets of my Arctic experience when starting to think about making artwork. My research question in terms of the exhibition became: "In what ways could disparate and phenomenological experiences be accounted for in a project regarding contemporary issues about climate change?"

LOST (FOR) WORDS

While I was tossing around ideas and thoughts for the *Melt* project, what was uppermost in my mind was how the reality of climate change was so inconceivable, so unthinkable, that actually no words could describe it. Even at this early stage of the project I was not thinking in words; in fact, I was not able to think in words. I started to play around



Figure 5: *Lost(for)Words-24 words for snow* (wax, wood, screenprint), 2008.



Figure 6: *Lost(for)Words-24 words for snow* (detail) (wax, wood, screenprint), 2008 (images courtesy of the artist).

with materials that could represent ice, such as chalk and plaster; and eventually I stumbled upon wax. While in the Arctic, I had become fascinated with the Inuit language and text – it has so few vowels and so many consonants used rarely in English – “q,” “k” and “j,” for example – and in the back of my mind was the fact, or possibly the myth, that they had dozens of words for “snow.” On the 13-day walk I took over 500 photographs and, somehow, for the exhibition I distilled these down to three images that represented ... what? I'm still not sure what it was about the three selected images that I found so compelling and so representative of the journey. At the time, I was also reading about early explorers' attempts to locate and traverse the North-West Passage – one generation's story overlaid the last until the present day, when it appears the Arctic might be ice-free within just a few years. And I was also reading newspapers, the latest reports and predictions of climate change. I used the term, *Lost(for)Words* as a prefix in the titles of all the works I produced, combining three words to make one “nonsensical” word; if one were to take away the bracketed word, then *Lost Words* would remain – loss of words equalled loss of culture and loss of environment.

In *Lost(for)Words – 24 words for snow*, I cast 24 panels in wax from polyethylene containers, cooling the melted wax in the fridge, which produced ice-like formations in the wax. Into each I carved one of the Baffin Island Inuit words for snow (I discovered that there actually were 24 words for snow in Baffin Island Inuit), barely legible except when

viewed in a raking light. By placing them on shelves, I wanted to indicate the redundancy of the words and the ice – and therefore, eventually, the Inuit culture. I accompanied the panels with a white-on-white screen print of text which contained the key to the wax panels, the meanings of each of the snow words – again, barely readable, lost white words in a lost white background.

I digitally manipulated the three selected photographs mentioned above (*Lost(for)Words-CO2*, *N2O* and *CH4*) to remove the “cool” colours – the blues and greens – and left only the reds, the “warm” colours, in response to ideas about global warming, which rendered the images familiar yet eerily strange. A shadow in the sky of each, caused by transparent vinyl lettering on the glass of the frame, indicated one of the three main greenhouse gasses – CO₂ (carbon dioxide), N₂O (nitrous oxide) and CH₄ (methane) – the strange chemical formulas being also a form of unreadable text or lost words.



Figure 7: *Lost(for)Words-CO2*, (inkjet print), 2008.



Figure 8: *Lost(for)Words-N2O*, (inkjet print), 2008.



Figure 9: *Lost(for)Words-CH4*, (inkjet print), 2008 (images courtesy of the artist).



Figure 10: *Lost(for)Words-account* (detail) (9 inkjet prints), 2008 (image courtesy of the artist).

Lost(for)Words – account, was a nine-panel work in which I overlaid many tales of the Arctic exploration, one over the other, which rendered them unreadable except for a single word in each. When read together with the words in the other frames, a mournful, nostalgic phrase was revealed – “yearning for the snow and ice that have disappeared forever.” I used the word “account” to apply to the tale that was told through history and also in the sense of “to bring to account” or require an explanation of a mistake or poor performance. As described by Lisa Byrne in the exhibition catalogue essay, the work “Evokes a haunting sense of oblivion. As containers of loss through poetic interplays of language, ephemeral materiality and landscape the works appear to be visually dissolving in front of us”¹⁴

WHEN IS A CAR NOT A CAR?

While we have few examples of real-life interdisciplinary, collaborative research projects involving artists, I recently came across an extraordinary one between the German car manufacturer BMW and the artist Olafur Eliasson, which took place in 2008 when Eliasson was commissioned by BMW to “envisage a car based on their hydrogen-powered H2R model.”¹⁵

Eliasson’s overarching concerns are with the ways we perceive the world and the relationship between perception and reality, for which he creates installations and sculptures, many based on the landscapes and environment of his familial home in Iceland. In his works he frequently incorporates natural phenomena such as ice, mist and natural light, often artificially constructing them within the gallery to challenge the ways that we encounter the world around us.

His aim with the BMW hydrogen car project was not to produce a new car model for BMW, but to play with and engage with some of the things that a car stands for in order for us to focus on the changing world and the consequences of our role in these changes. Through this project he eschewed the usual precepts for the design of new cars, such as designing them as desirable commodities or fetish objects with no consideration of their relationship to their surroundings. His focus was not on the most profitable way a car can move us around or to be in competition with rival models, but to “reintroduce time as the key producer of our experiences. Reality then becomes temporal reality.”¹⁶ In this way, the car becomes more than simply a vehicle for transportation. In Eliasson’s hands, it goes beyond being a status symbol and a means of getting from one place to another; it becomes a collective concern. He says that: “By bringing together art, design, social and environmental issues, I hope to contribute to a different way of thinking-feeling-experiencing cars and seeing them in relation to the time and space in which we live.”¹⁷

As part of his research into making the car a collective concern, Eliasson collaborated with and interviewed a disparate group of participants, experts in their respective fields, including an architectural critic and curator, a professor of heterogeneous catalysis, an automobile designer, an astrophysicist, a violin-maker, an artist and media theorist and several architects. For me, the interesting thing here is that he is the one who initiated the collaboration; he is not the artist brought into the project as a kind of token. Through a series of challenging, questioning sessions with his selected contributors, an integral part of the whole project, Eliasson elicited “truly inspiring and acute observations.”¹⁸ This is not the place to go into these conversations in detail – after all, they make up a large part of the resulting book – but what awakened my curiosity was the effect that Eliasson’s questioning had on his interviewees and the ways their respective fields and expertise were challenged in the process. Many of his contributors would normally undertake research in fairly conservative or traditional ways but, in this project, the artist caused them to think in different ways and reconsider their habitual ways of going about things.

Eliasson’s research also included collaborative workshops where he brought together a studio team to work out form development for the car; based on the content he had already determined regarding the car as a thing in the world that occupied our time and space concurrently. In the fabrication of the car, he “sidestepped the usual focus

on function, aerodynamics and technical specificities, venturing instead into various surface studies and experiments with form and light."¹⁹ The actual body of the H2R (Hydrogen Record Car) provided by BMW was allowed to stand in the studio as a presence on the periphery that gave scale and gravity to the work. From there on, he reduced the shape of the car to a sphere and experimented with skins of nets and flexible fabrics in order to suggest movement rather than make a moving object; his focus was on the movement of the spectator that made the appearance of the car change. Other speculative investigations with this non-functional object included freezing the nets after watering them and other ice experiments, the development of steel structures and the use of mirrors and lighting effects. Hardly ever did the resulting form resemble a car but, through the workshops and the experimental constructions, Eliasson and his collaborators continued to explore the ideas that underpinned the car project. In this way, Eliasson applied what he knew through being an artist to what he didn't know about car design, and continued to explore his ongoing concerns regarding the ways we interact with the world through adapting them to a specific research project in the real world.

Although no new car design eventuated, the project impacted not only on his expert contributors but also on art gallery visitors when the object was eventually displayed in museums around the world. As he states:

I involve myself in a new field almost every time I take on a project, but the topics I research into are always somehow related to our understanding of the individual and to questions of sociality – I'm interested in how we connect with our surrounding world.²⁰

RESEARCH AS ART AS KNOWLEDGE

The scientists involved in Eliasson's car project were able to recognise his project as research in the context of what they undertook as research. However, art may yet have a long way to go to be legitimately accepted as a way to address global and local issues – possibly because the ability to linguistically articulate the contribution we might make is evasive, and also because of the ways that art is perceived through the eyes of science.

In 1998 some of the photographs of magnified, delicate residues and other experiments by the English artist, Cornelia Parker, were included in that most respected of scientific journals, *Nature*, over four consecutive issues as genuine research articles. One vociferous reaction from a Leicester University postgraduate student was very telling: "What's this bollocks doing in *Nature*?"²¹ Unlike the conventional refereed articles in *Nature*, according to the author, Martin Kemp, "Parker's pieces do not rely on fixed meaning. They do not communicate with the studiously unambiguous parades of hypothesis, evidence, analysis and demonstration that is the aspiration of articles and letters in this journal."²²

For many years, Cornelia Parker has played with scientific and museological tropes and analyses and elaborated on them through her work. In an interview with Lisa LeFeuvre at the Tate Gallery in London in May 2008, Parker was able to account profusely for her work, its influences, inspirations and the processes she engages. However, when asked about her intentions for the work she is not so articulate, and is unable to put it into words so coherently and instead uses an analogy. She describes intention as being like a "hole," a hole in material – for example, a marble hole or a wooden hole where the hole obviously is not made of wood, but the hole is what defines it; the hole is defined by the material that surrounds it and it is not possible to quantify it. Intention in this way can only be described by what it isn't, by what surrounds it. In Parker's words, "It's very hard to describe" – her interviewer articulates it as the stuff around the thing that can't be put into words and, if it were, then it would disappear.²³

The term "experiential knowledge" has been used to describe the embodiment of knowledge that cannot easily be expressed linguistically, and constitutes an important part of the processes and outcomes of art and design practice and research.²⁴ In a culture such as that which characterises our universities and funding bodies, notions of research are construed to emphasise linguistic communication over visual, whereas the issue of embodied knowledge is of fundamental importance to art practice. Where "traditional" research has come to mean explicit knowledge,

“non-traditional” research, which evades linguistic communication, includes the kinds of knowledge not normally accepted in research – such as experiential, perceptual, procedural, tacit and personal knowledge. Through their activities, research artists can gather together a vast array of references and, through the processes of making, they can generate and distil thoughts and new ideas that can be communicated through the artwork and make genuine contributions to new knowledge.

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- 1 Tomi K Sawyer, “If We Knew What We Were Doing, it Wouldn’t be Called Research Would it?,” *Chemical Biology and Drug Design*, 7:1:1 (2007), <http://www3.interscience.wiley.com/journal/119422878/abstract>, accessed 12 March 2009.
- 2 Graeme Sullivan, “Research Acts in Art Practice,” *Studies in Art Education: A Journal of Issues and Research*, 48:1 (2006), 19-35, at 19.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid., 20.
- 7 G Refsum, “Contribution to an Understanding of the Knowledge Base in the Field of Visual Arts,” *Working Papers in Art and Design*, 2 (2002), <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol2/refsumfull.html>, accessed 18 June 2007.
- 8 Extracted from Lesley Duxbury, “The Eye (and Mind) of the Beholder,” *Thinking Through Practice: Art as Research in the Academy*, eds L Duxbury, EM Grierson, and D Waite (Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2007), 17-27, at 19.
- 9 Simon Starling, “Autoxylopyrocycloboros: Simon Starling interviewed by Ross Birrell,” *Art & Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods*, 1:1 (2006/07), 1-8, <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk>, accessed 3 March 2009.
- 10 Ibid., 1.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Ibid., 7.
- 13 The exhibition *Melt* included artists Dee Copland (NZ), Lesley Duxbury and Kirsten Haydon, was held in the RMIT School of Art, Project Space Gallery, 12 September–3 October 2008, and travelled to the University Gallery, Sydney University, 1 February–15 March 2009.
- 14 Lisa Byrne, catalogue essay, *Melt* (Melbourne: RMIT University Press, 2008).
- 15 Olafur Eliasson, “Development of your Mobile Expectations: BMW H2R Project,” in *Your Mobile Expectations: BMW H2R Project* (Baden: Lars Müller, 2008), 34.
- 16 Ibid., 19.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid., 34.
- 19 Ibid.
- 20 Ibid., 49.
- 21 Martin Kemp, “Parker’s Pieces,” *Nature*, 392 (1998), 663, <http://www.nature.com/nature/journal/v392/n6677/full/392663a0.html>, accessed 3 March 2009.
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Transcribed from a Tate Event podcast of a conversation between Cornelia Parker and curator Lisa LeFeuvre, 31 May 2008 (accessed 4 June 2008).
- 24 The Experiential Knowledge Special Interest Group in the UK is concerned with the understanding and management of knowledge in research and professional practice in design and design-related disciplines in order to clarify fundamental principles and practices of using practice within research, both with regard to research regulations and requirements, and research methodology.