

# The Dialogic: art work as method

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**NAFAE - FINE ART RESEARCH NETWORK SYMPOSIUM, THE UNIVERSITY OF CUMBRIA, 2016**  
**Research Practice, Practice Research**

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**Abstract:**

This paper discusses how the multisite artwork *The Dialogic* demonstrates an innovative, supportive and generative artwork-as-method which resists overly reductive, and prescriptive tendencies within practice-led research.

It continues a dialogue between participants that has been ongoing since 2012. *The Dialogic* has been adapted through the work of multiple artists, and this iteration is offered as a dialogue between the artists John Hammersley and Rachelle Viader Knowles in response to reflections in the work of Simon Pope. *The Dialogic* emerged as a method-work which imbricates the artist in socially situated exchange across multiple contexts, enacts co-authored and co-produced meaning-making, and challenges assumptions about the separation of art and research and notions of the detached artist-researcher. Its innovative contribution to practice-led research is how it demonstrates dialogical art as the on-going re-construction of a community of support, sustained through a commitment to knowledge mobilization, continued exchange and engagement in which the artist and their work are 'answerable' for the choices and actions in their art-as-research.

The work functions as a generative research tool. It demonstrates how semi-structured everyday conversational-exchange-as-art can simultaneously lead to the emergence of subconsciously held insights, construct a community of practice that helps shape thinking outside of institutional frameworks, and act as a situated literature review that may disrupt traditional frameworks of knowledge production normalized in much fine art research.

The authors argue that this method is appropriate to dialogical art-as-research as it makes a necessary contribution to the practice-led research tool box. It offers a method of distributive authorship grounded in an emergent, situated and more provisional mode of meaning-making that facilitates generous, democratized, peer-to-peer co-mentorship and skill-sharing contributing to understandings of dialogical art as research. This they argue is an increasingly necessary counterpoint to the reduction of practice-led fine art research to a training in mechanistic methods, reductive evaluation, and singular concrete outcomes aimed at satisfying the artist-researcher as customer and consumer.

## Introduction

'Annemari, you introduced the idea of dialogue as more than "conversation" when a group of us met for a session of *The Dialogic* (Pope, 2015: 8).'

*The Dialogic* is a multi-participant, multi-site, artwork which functions as a multi-method research tool and support mechanism for practice-based artist-researchers. Participants have included artists Glenn Davison, Ruben Henry, and Karin Kihlberg; artist-researchers undertaking practice-led inquiry such as, Simon Pope, Annemari Ferreira, Rachelle Viader Knowles, John Hammersley and Rebecca Birch, and various other artists, curators and academics (appendix 1). Each manifestation of *The Dialogic* invites in further participants from the context in which it is staged.

Connected to the notion of microresidency (temporary, artist-led, small-scale), *The Dialogic* is a peripatetic, itinerant, and mobile method-as-work-of-art, which demonstrates socially-grounded situated practice in the sense of embodied interpersonal interaction (Kwon, 2004) in contrast to more fixed Modernist interpretations of situated practice. The first manifestation took place at the Danielle Arnaud Gallery London in 2012, with subsequent gatherings at Loughborough University, The Ruskin and Modern Art Oxford, Birkbeck London, the Lanchester Gallery at Coventry University, the Welsh School of Architecture Cardiff, and most recently at RES Art Space London in 2015. As a multi-method work *The Dialogic* reflects the ethos and disposition of the convenor of each iteration, and as such they are not always documented, and are not always framed as a response to an initial theme or question, but what unites them are the central threads of extended conversation between frequent and occasional participants, and the sharing of food.

Inspired by Bakhtinian (1986) and Bohmian (1996) notions of dialogue, the semi-structured conversations blur free-ranging social and convivial exchange with a conversation-as-work-of-art (Bhabha, 1998), which seeks emergent understanding and new insights for research and practice. *The Dialogic* builds on a basic conception of Bohmian dialogue as event and collaborative conversational method, and also implies an attitude and disposition towards others (Pope, 2015). On the one hand this dialogical disposition is akin to Bakhtinian polyphony, a quest for words and ideas, which emerge through dialogical exchange but a quest which goes beyond a person's familiar genre or style and authorial habits (Bakhtin, 1986). Polyphony is characterized by a plurality of voices and points of view that posits *The Dialogic* as a method-work-as-art that resists singular definitions through a reiterative layering of different interpretations of dialogue-based art: as Performance, Social Practice, Event, Encounter and as Social-constructionist research. On the other hand, *The Dialogic's* plurality is proposed as a Buberian (2002) disposition towards others and being open to learning through transformational encounters with others (Pope, 2015).

The emphasis on openness to learning from plural perspectives without reducing insights that emerge from plural exchange to a singular agreed outcomes or definitions is central to the work's importance for many of its participants. Conceived of as an operative method in practice-led research *The Dialogic* functions to offset impacts deriving from the tendency towards isolated, individualized approaches common to many research projects in art, and overly prescriptive disciplinary or programmatic modes of inquiry. This offsetting is achieved through the on-going dialogical labour of constructing a community of diverse but overlapping and shared interests. For Pope, Knowles and Hammersley, *The Dialogic* functions to ameliorate the psychological impacts of

mechanistic instruction in research methods, reductive systems of evaluation, and art's traditional emphasis on singular concrete outcomes which they feel are aimed primarily at satisfying the artist-researcher as customer orientated towards consumerism within the art market.

*The Dialogic* emerged out of research-dialogue between Pope and Hammersley and grew through Pope's further conversations with Knowles and Ferreira, and as such it has been a constant artwork method and element of his doctoral research. Central to his thesis, and the understanding of Knowles and Hammersley, is that dialogical art as practice-led research is open ended. This paper continues the labour of dialogue-as-art demonstrated by *The Dialogic* and attempts to re-perform some of the meanings which have emerged through a reflection on elements of Pope's DPhil thesis *Who else takes part?: Admitting the more-than-human into participatory art* and our participation. The following sections are presented as a conversational transcript of a discussion that covers how *The Dialogic* has contributed to our understanding of practice-led research and how it has transformed our disposition towards practice.

In the dialogue, participants address how *The Dialogic* functions as a generative research tool. This introduces the idea that a key benefit of its generative potential has been the formation of a community of interest that functions as a supportive method for some members and which demonstrates an open commitment to knowledge mobilization. These interconnecting ideas lead onto a reflection on how mobilizing knowledge through a generative socially grounded art-conversation can empower artist-researchers to take creative risks, explore alternative conceptualisations of themes, and adopt a stance of situated answerability in their practice (Bakhtin, 1990) in contrast to more traditional disposition of distanced artistic authorship.

The mode of presentation as a dialogue follows on from and contrasts this more conventional introduction as a means to emphasise the constructed nature of presentations of dialogical research. What follows is not a transcript but a weaving of excerpts from Pope's thesis, and email exchanges between authors, substantially post-produced by one author and edited by others.

The aim is to reiterate the stance of the authors that transcriptions of conversations can never be objective representations of complex multi-perspectival situated interactions, but they can strive to present and re-perform something of the kind of reflective and polyphonic conversation that *The Dialogic* strives to be. We hope this presents *The Dialogic* as a method-artwork as encounter that invites imaginative active participation and serves as a reminder of the hoped for transformational potential of practice-led research in art education.

### ***The Dialogic* as generative research tool.**

**John Hammersley:** One of the most important aspects of *The Dialogic* for me is that it is generative in a number of ways. Simon, I know you have been very specific in expressing how the generative dimension of *The Dialogic* functions as a sort of situated literature review, generating new insights and connections from each specific and located encounter.

**Simon Pope:** Yes. I would say that *The Dialogic* has played an important role in the development of my thesis, more specifically it has shaped the process by which I review secondary sources such as journal articles. *The Dialogic* ethos steered me away somewhat from conventional literature reviews, and instead I realized that the process could be focused and refined through a peer-group of other researchers and artists with similar concerns. *The Dialogic* functions for me as a

dialogue-on-dialogue in relation to my art and research. The process negotiates and brings to the fore the context of all of our research practices, especially art historical and theoretical discourse, but what I find interesting is that it also admits local discourse that emerges through encounters. *The Dialogic* highlights that for me, my thesis has emerged through social processes rather than simply detached scholarship. As I wrote in my thesis, 'Its situatedness in a lively and ongoing co-construction of a social world also provides me with one measure of where my doctoral research makes its "contribution"' (Pope 2015: 37).

**John:** So *The Dialogic* is generative of a socially situated thesis that reflects your concerns and those of your peers who contribute to the social construction of your understanding?

**Simon:** You might say so.

**John:** How new meaning and insights can emerge out of situated conversations-as-work-of-art became apparent in your work *Forward Back Together* (2013). For me it connects both our earlier conversational works with *The Dialogic*. That work for me linked the idea of emergent understanding as a fusion of perspectives or horizons (Gadamer, 2004) in which elements of multiple overlapping contexts can be woven into what is said in everyday conversation, with the Bakhtinian (1990) notion of dialogical encounter as 'interlocation'. Both ideas emphasise a living context as a background against which meaning can emerge and that allowed me to connect these works with the constructionist idea that free flowing conversation can be a generative and reflective mixture of thought (Locke, 2007) and I think that reflects how conversation in *The Dialogic*, at least for me, is a creative and imaginative open-ended exchange through which I discover and learn.

**Simon:** I think Bhabha (1998) makes that point about conversation as art, that it's a free associative mode of communication.

**John:** Yes, but he also says something like it simultaneously produces generative new relationships of meaning and interpretative communities of those new meanings.

**Rachelle Viader Knowles:** I think it's interesting how such free associative and collaborative exchange serves to disrupt the traditional framework of knowledge production normalized in much fine art research.

**John:** Like kind of connecting free associative exchange with Kester's (2013) point that socially grounded or connected forms of knowledge generated through art can mitigate against the constraints imposed on art's thematic concerns by dominant critical perspectives.

**Rachelle:** Well, maybe. I was really wondering what this might say about the contribution of artistic research to a broader world of knowledge. I mean how does artistic research provoke, challenge, disrupt traditional frameworks for knowledge production. I think you are suggesting Simon that *The Dialogic* proposes how frameworks can be performed differently – a rethinking of what a literature review is for example.

**John:** I found it quite difficult to understand how *The Dialogic* opened up these possibilities even as they seemed to be closed down in my conversations with some philosophers and critics. I think the framing of conversation as in somehow everyday seemed to read as vague, banal, or a risky deviation from the preoccupations that the literature seemed to prescribe as valid themes or

questions to address through art research. This sense of recognising the value in the thematic concerns of the peer-group has taken me some time, it has definitely been part of the labour and work. It began to happen after a number of encounters and is something I'm still working at.

**Rachelle:** But that is another important generative aspect of *The Dialogic*, how it functions to enact and construct a community of practice. The types of exchange we have help me think outside of my institutional frameworks, and what I sometimes feel are the overly programmatic thematic concerns of art research. And I'm...

**John:** Yes, it took me a long time to grasp that I was in danger of unwittingly importing what I see as an administrative bias into my research and it wasn't until very late in the day that I saw a possible connection between what Liam Gillick, Lawrence Weiner (2005/2006) and Dave Beech (2012) say about the constraints on or narrow interpretations of dialogical art discourse and the caveats to social constructionist researchers that highlight administrative bias as a common risk in research (McCoy, 2008). But sorry Rachelle, I interrupted.

**Rachelle:** I was just going to say that I'm using my participation in *The Dialogic* to find a community of like-minded folk who share a similar set of concerns that help shape my thinking.

**John:** Yes, I assumed I might find them in the institution where I did my research. Well, that's where I started to work with Simon. But don't we also do that at conferences?

**Rachelle:** It's more than that. Conferences like 'Open Engagement' or 'InDialogue' can still function along very institutional lines, particularly now that artists with PhD's need 'research outputs', but what I'm interested in is something outside of what I'm paying for in university or conference fees, its more like peer-to-peer mentorship, a skill share or exchange.

**John:** I would just be concerned how it appears to outsiders though, because even as an aesthetic community of interest it can appear exclusive and perhaps open dialogue up to the familiar criticisms of being overly convivial or conceived of as an agreeable process of understanding in an idealized context.

**Rachelle:** The iteration of *The Dialogic* I convened at Coventry University, in the Lanchester Galley with two walls of windows, is an interesting one in regards to your concern about 'how it appears to outsiders' as passers by were located rather literally in that position of looking in. How would a passer-by characterize what they saw... a group of people having a meeting?

### ***The Dialogic* as supportive method.**

**John:** Meeting rather conjures the picture of consensus or a group of insiders.

**Simon:** Claire Bishop (2006) is the obvious critic that springs to mind. She is sceptical of intersubjective exchange that appears to build consensus or represent a misplaced attempt at strengthening the social bond (Pope, 2015). But interpretations of dialogue often conflate being together and empathy with consensus building or negotiation.

**John:** I don't see what we do in *The Dialogic* as negotiation or consensus building.

**Simon:** Well I mention in my thesis that in Bohmian (2004) dialogue negotiation takes place prior to dialogue, prior to entering into intersubjective relations, which presupposes that before hand others have merely been objects among other objects in the world.

**Rachelle:** I think Simon you point out, and I think you also recognize John, that there is some prior negotiation in the group, in the sense that similar questions about dialogue have emerged independently through our practices. And various members of *The Dialogic* know each other from previous contexts, so there are also prior negotiations of the social relations.

**Simon:** We share the question of how to reach a new understanding of our different practices in relation to dialogue. Yes. But I just want to reiterate that I don't see *The Dialogic* as agreeable and opposed to the ethos of disruptive difference underpinning Bishop's criticisms. I think she feels that artists have to be allowed to provoke, and be disagreeable. *The Dialogic*, at least for me is closer to Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) point of view that antagonisms can reveal the limits of objective relations and all objectivity. So for me at least 'the concept of dialogue can contain with it room for antagonism and difference', (Pope, 2015: 3).

**John:** I'm not sure I get the point about Laclau and Mouffe but I would agree that dialogue is not all agreeable. Certainly I've found moments of *The Dialogic* very uncomfortable.

**Rachelle:** I have also... I found the encounters extremely intimidating at first, I really didn't know quite how to participate, or what this was exactly...

**Simon:** But certainly early on in my research our exchanges in *The Dialogic* really did transform my understanding of the relationship between my practice and the processes of research. It's what Annemari points out, that dialogue is more than a conversational technique, its also an ethos and manner of relating to others in general, that's really sustained my research throughout.

**John:** I felt a responsibility to keep coming back, even when the institutional processes left me feeling a bit battered and made me feel like retreating, so I think I can connect with that. It's more than just the verbalism of dialogue, its been about the support that *The Dialogic* has had in sustaining a belief in the importance of doing dialogue, and being changed by it, not just researching it.

**Rachelle:** I wonder if there is an important contrast, or perhaps if *The Dialogic* has something to say about the continuing separation between much art and research?

**John:** Do you mean how isolated art research can leave you feeling?

**Rachelle:** I was thinking that *The Dialogic* demonstrates a mode of co-authorship, or a model of co-produced meaning-making through practice-led research which certainly challenges the notion of artist-researcher as detached individual. Creative practices often happen through collaboration but the institutional framework maintains solo authorship of a PhD thesis as the norm....

**John:** But are we making the point that dialogical practice is a collective enterprise that needs sustaining internally through renewed commitment to the mobilization of thought, or are we simply reflecting the point that artists often use collective conversation as a support or adjunct to practice. I'm thinking of one of the case studies in *Artistic Bedfellows* where Varian Fry sets up a villa to where artists met to collaborate and share meals. What strikes me is how collaboration

was almost essential to maintain a relationship between the more stable past and a period of uncertainty and psychological pressure (Brockington, 2008). I'm not saying practice-led research is like surviving an occupation or war but simply I recognised that non-artists, artists of different career stages and reputations and even temporary visitors can all gain some resources for supporting their sense of self through creative exchange with each other. I think they were visited by Peggy Guggenheim and it was Danielle Arnaud's hosting of the first *Dialogic* that made me think of that. But we might need to be clear whether this support is perhaps felt most keenly by those doing practice-led research and I am curious about how that might separate us from others in the group. I haven't asked if they feel similarly that *The Dialogic* has formed a community of support for them. We're saying it makes a contribution to us, as a method in our practice-led research but we can't speak for the other participants?

### ***The Dialogic* as contribution to the practice-led research tool box.**

**Simon:** I've stated, I think quite clearly, that the contribution *The Dialogic* makes as a method has been to convey a sense of ethos and disposition towards others that has both led to new insights but also a community that share similar questions about practice and research that may not be reflected in institutional frameworks. As I put it in my thesis, I understand dialogue as 'openness to transformation on encounter with others, in contrast to their detailed description, or conforming them to a framework or category', (Pope, 2015: 10).

**John:** I'm not sure I get your point.

**Simon:** What is innovative about *The Dialogic* as research method is that it prioritises the transformational nature of learning possible through dialogical practice-led research as opposed to being forced to conform to a prescribed model of learning as practice-led research.

**Rachelle:** But you acknowledge that evaluating art work on the basis of an artist's attitude towards others rather than what an artist actually does has been criticized by Claire Bishop (2012).

**Simon:** But Bishop's (2012) criticism is levelled from the observing point of view of the external critic, not one considering how their understanding might be transformed through an encounter with such a work. Mary Anne Francis (2014: 32-33) who was one of my examiners pointed out that such methods of critical engagement do not quite get to grips with the 'poetics' implied by participatory dialogical research. I still feel that as artists we might expect that critics remain open to being transformed by dialogical works, as I feel artists strive to engage criticism on its own terms (Pope, 2015).

**John:** Yes, but I think that you point out that to engage with the work of critics on their own terms we might still have to work at remaining open to its potential contribution to transformational learning.

**Rachelle:** Rather than rejecting it outright.

**John:** Or accepting it outright. I think *The Dialogic* keeps some of those perspectives more provisional for me.



**Simon:** *The Dialogic* as a work or method recognizes that the work of critics such as Bishop reflects a different construction and world of meaning. I think dialogue reveals criticism to be one of the important ways of 'becoming aware' of other ways of understanding relationships within the world.

**John:** So you're (Pope, 2015) saying one contribution *The Dialogic* makes is that the situated conversation has exposed, the seemingly obvious idea now, that the idea of how research should be conducted is produced by quite different cultures of practice and their ontologies.

**Simon:** Yes, I draw on Richard Hickman's (2008) mapping of the art research terrain to locate *The Dialogic* as a naturalistic and social constructivist method or approach to research (2015).

**John:** That's certainly been my take on it. But it's interesting that you describe that as qualitative, in the sense of qualitative research. That's a term that has elicited a lot of hostility when I have used it in some philosophical contexts of fine art research.

**Simon:** I'm just saying that *The Dialogic* demonstrates an alternative mode of thinking to partitive or dialectical thinking which is frequently assumed to be a natural mode of thinking. It's a means of 'engaging the world in all its richness and diversity through the open-ended relationships that constantly form the world or art world. It's a seeking to be transformed through research through a movement towards others (Pope, 2015).

**John:** But I found so many encounters early on rather disorientating, *The Dialogic* made sense after some time, once I had had the chance to reflect on many of the encounters.

**Rachelle:** Simon, you point out in your thesis that its how *The Dialogic* can open up practice-led research to other perspectives that is important.

**Simon:** I (2015: 16) argued that *The Dialogic* 'suggests alliances with other researchers, artists, and practitioners which breach disciplinary boundaries, enabling us to recognize and [sic] affinity with social scientists, humanities scholars, and with artists who are ordinarily divided from us by technical specialism. It also suggests that our doctoral research is a process of learning, rather than training in how to adopt a position or defend an assertion through argument'

**John:** Yes, I've been thinking of the learning potential of *The Dialogic* as akin to a transformational education of Dirkx and Mezirow (2006), a learning that permits or maybe necessitates a reconstruction of frameworks. But this feels very far from my early experiences of practice-led research. It wasn't until I gained a sociologist on my supervisory team that this became somehow acceptable, and truly transformational.

**Rachelle:** I think this is why it's important for me, *The Dialogic* provides a means of gaining insight into a situated field of practice which demonstrates art as allegiance, and as a mode of distributive authorship.

**John:** Distributive authorship?

**Rachelle:** It admits that we gain insights into the field of practice from many other sources but it's a work of distributed authorship as art. I'm just saying it makes a contribution as it facilitates a model of generous, democratized peer-to-peer, co-mentorship, and skill sharing through

exchange. That really is a counterpoint to all the mechanistic, benchmarked, formal outcomes aimed at the doctoral researcher as consumer, the PhD as customer.

**John:** Well, apart from my sensitivity to the word democratic, which I think risks dragging things back to the kind of narrow themes deemed important by critics (Beech, 2012), I think you're suggesting that *The Dialogic* has value as a method which can disrupt the knowledge economy of capitalist education, or at least disrupt our relationship as researchers to it. I'd say it has done that for me, but what about those participants who are less invested in research and perhaps more invested in the market?

### **Conclusion – *The Dialogic* some reflections**

**Rachelle:** You mean like the consumers of this text? I wonder if we shouldn't perhaps be slightly more playful with this and hint at some contradictions in the script...

**John:** Yes – absolutely, can you suggest some of the paradoxes there are? In your words please.

**Rachelle:** Well perhaps Rachelle could acknowledge that for the most part her text has not been written by herself and how pleasurable and liberating that somehow feels...

**John:** Great.

**Simon:** Simon could acknowledge that his voice is being co-opted from emails and his thesis for this fictional triangulation.

**John:** Yes but I'd also wondered about running a draft past Simon.

**Rachelle:** That would seem to convey the notion of this text as both meta-text that performs rather than documents, and as a polyphony that snips voices and points of view from the tethers of connections to specific speakers.

**John:** Yes, that's a good line for the introduction. Yet, I'm not sure we've admitted to the limitation of the method. Obviously such a method is non-generalizable like many qualitative methods. But on an operational level, I think taking methodological risks, even adopting adaptive emergent methods which are not necessarily linear or straightforward can be easier for people who are more experienced researchers. Or maybe its even simpler than that. Maybe a method which risks contradicting traditional expectations, of literature reviews and thematic concerns is easier for researchers who have already achieved some recognition within hierarchies of art education and practice (Gillick and Weiner, 2005/2006).

**Simon:** I would also add that the work could be construed as that kind of subaltern move to achieve greater institutional recognition by presenting itself as admitting ignored or local perspectives.

**John:** Your suggesting recuperation? Can it really be that subaltern in all the academic contexts that it's been manifested in? Surely the problem of the method is offsetting the need to capitalize on the labour and time involved and seeing it only as a means of access to institutional contexts?

**Simon:** But as a method it is freely available and out there, its mobile, able to be re-performed and re-understood. I think it can have a life beyond institutional frames but it will be interesting to see how that plays out.

**Rachelle:** John, aren't you going to add something somewhere about your iteration of *The Dialogic* and the first move into a domestic space?

**John:** You keep prompting me to mention that the next manifestation will be at my house with a possible move into the Yorkshire Dales landscape.

**Rachelle:** This text aside then, I'm still wondering what and how we actually present in Lancaster! Current thoughts on that?

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### **Appendix 1: Participants of *The Dialogic*.**

Dr Simon Pope, Annemari Ferreira, Dr John Hammersley, Rachelle Viader Knowles, Glenn Davidson, Anne Hayes, Karin Kihlberg, Ruben Henry, Rebecca Birch, Neville Gabie, Sergio Pineda, Henry Proctor, Giles Lane, Jane Ball, Danielle Arnaud.