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Possibility over Time: Sustaining Interdisciplinary Practice in the Zones of Possibility

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Abstract

The lure of practice beyond disciplinary ordinance lies in potential for thinking beyond established paradigms. Belgian philosopher of science, Isabelle Stengers claims that things already impinge across disciplinary boundaries; that an “ecology of practices” is possible in the “event” of interdisciplinary transaction. This paper investigates insights from one art practice that links to other practices for particular durations. It thereby enters zones dependent on temporal aggregation and attentive dialogues, enunciating a chain of potentially generative and sustaining production for those involved.

... concerned with an uncertain relation of coming to knowledge,... eccentrically constituted archives are the cherishable product of that uncertainty....The eccentricity of archives depends on how we live in them Rob Stone¹

I call possibility what cannot be calculated a priori because it implies the fact that the very description of the system itself can change. And you cannot calculate that. Possibility is connected to what I call events.
Isabelle Stengers²

The existence of the artist in time is worth as much as the finished product. Any critic who devalues the time of the artist, is the enemy of art and the artist.
Robert

Smithson³

time beings

There forever was an ephemeral public art project undertaken on the cusp of a massive gentrification of the Port River area in Adelaide South Australia in April 2007.⁴ On completion of my contribution to the project, a suite of four works titled *Continuous Wave*, I pondered the complex of processes involved. In focusing on this together consecutive works *Air Conditioner* in *Line Drawing* (2008) and *Oxymorons for a better life (scope)* (2008), I extrapolate some sustaining possibilities for interdisciplinary art practices and for social articulations of art beyond historically prescribed, formally intrinsic or market values.

In order to clarify my conceptions of interdisciplinarity, I refer to the perspectives of Belgian science philosopher Isabelle Stengers. Stengers advances the view that association with practitioners in different fields enables sustainable and enlivening, creative possibilities to exceed probable expectations. Her 'ecology of practices' therefore locates possibility or 'events' in the interstices, between disciplinary boundaries or in ways that make those boundaries indeterminate. Events cannot be predicted *a priori* but are encountered through risk; a process that also involves slowing down and relating thinking with feeling. Through reliable witnessing of the practices of others, transformative and sustaining innovations can thus be engendered in the inter-regions.⁵

With this in mind, the paper contributes to a process of eccentric “archiving” of interdisciplinary, performative and material practices. Being an undeniably active and fallible archiving, it unfolds events for the “untimely witness”. I therefore write here to recall events for myself, as much as for others who perform the work out of time. I acknowledge that such an experience can only ever be subjective and fragmentary. Philosopher Jacques Rancière comments that representations are heterogeneous fictions and like memories, are always partial, forming as:

the construction of relationships between something visible and some meaning, between heterogeneous spaces and times. . . .The artistic work of memory is that which accords everyone the dignity of fiction.⁶

These art gestures have a wildish disregard for temporal consistency; sometimes emerging from slow antecedents such as a serial conversation and then suddenly transforming with unexpected yet convincing inexorability. If, as it seems I am witnessing a map of my own non-linear creative cognition beset with concentration lapses, affectual intensities and intuitive leaps they are also processes beholden to cultural contexts. Therefore the erudite ponderings of philosophers and cultural thinkers are brought to bear on the performed and material “time-beings”. This is not to contain or explain away errant details, but rather to keep public company with parallel voyagers in cultural discourse. Recalled from my experience of events in practice, this presentation refers to artwork and writing that are complete in themselves yet they have been produced provisionally: to assume or manoeuvre towards durational negotiation.

You can always tell a pirate by the sound of his voice

Work on *Continuous Wave* began as a response to the inhabitants of particular place. As Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt⁷ note social conditions and relations are ultimately “sculpted” by architectural nuance.

Commensurately, the works that emerged there were both performative and material artefacts and corresponded to the architectural transition in process. The sites became locations for dialogue and work titles; *swamp*-the state of the port prior to settlement c1830s, *dock* the site of already razed structures at the time of my intervention, *shack* the old customs booth for incoming goods and *shed* a long-term *domus maximus* of a houseboat and its designer. The latter two buildings are threatened with demolition but until now, remain standing. The shack, dubbed the “radio shack”, is currently being considered for heritage listing and has served as the meeting place and accoutrements storage for of a 25 year-old ham radio club. While convincingly internet-savvy, club members are amateur radio stalwarts, experts in radio electronics, antenna building and other kinds of (anachronistic?) communication systems like Morse code aka “continuous wave”. Radio communication, they informed me, more than internet communication affords acuity of interpersonal awareness; ‘you can always tell a pirate by the sound of his voice’. I attended their Wednesday night meetings over a twelve-week period establishing my interest in them as current Port residents on the cusp of change and signalling that I wanted to develop an art project with them. We talked about radio, the shack, or themselves and often they worked to entice me to love the things that they love; into an understanding of radio electronics and other know-how.

Over time complex social dynamics of any group are revealed, albeit this group opened to and indulged a shared artistic identification in the process. Curiosity and interest about what would transpire between respective fields of knowledge and expertise built slowly and incrementally. In subscribing to a different kind of local value and bearing witness to an erstwhile unknown field of electronic knowledge, I opened the work to new individual and group subjectivities. Jorella Andrews emphasizes, ‘the capacity to take up personalized ways of being in ...[a] complex other(ness)-oriented way is something that must be learned and practiced’ and this has been a process of bringing into conjunction and witnessing different making processes.⁸ Irit Rogoff highlights that looking away from the intended focus of cultural production may allow different articulations to emerge:

... the act of looking away from the objects of our supposed study, in the shifting modalities of attention...[has] a potential for a re-articulation of the relations between objects, makers and audience. Can looking away be...an alternative form of taking part in culture...the diverting of attention from that which is meant to compel it, i.e. the actual work on display can at times free up a recognition that other manifestations are taking place...

Irit Rogoff⁹

In this case, looking away occurred as an alternative to the more solitary (myth of) art production and as diversion from individual and group focus on radio. As initiator of the project, looking away for me was an intuitive choice based on the context of architectural and demographic transition and flux.¹⁰ Often relational artwork seems remiss in its potential to (re) exploit vulnerable people in adverse circumstances and in its sensational media-like documents of “real life”. During the collaborations, the quiet potency of this work revealed itself differently. Artefacts circumvented direct identifications such that only video shots of hands or sounds of voices were discernable. Despite my fears to the contrary, sustained interest and attention afforded sufficient understanding for works to be achieved without contrived surrender of expertise and aesthetic competence. Sometimes we just needed to wait for the next move to become evident or material to be sourced or fabricated.

Ultimately, *shack* was opened to the public as a ready-made installation and performance; a site of material knowledge and community accompanied by the recorded sound of our conversations. Although a single-track recording was produced, the multi-layered “talk-all-at-once” type of conversations that mostly prevailed there, gave the impression of more complex sound engineering. To me this aptly reflected the layered and fluid identification of performers /makers and spectators from one to time to another. Significantly, each meeting with the radio club was, in itself, a social and cultural performance; a process

most cogently faithful to the concerns of the participants and the project. The indeterminate temporal location of the artwork and fluctuating identifications convinced me that in turning my attention from gallery-approved formulas of cultural production something significant could occur.

Ninety bottles of water in plastic containers were situated inside the shack each with an inscribed date. Since amenities had been disconnected pending demolition, the club treasurer conscientiously carried water each week to ensure that tea and other conveniences were continued. After dark on the final night, in the performance titled *swamp* I carried the bottles of water two by two onto the dock. A local audience watched as the accumulating bottles lit by a generator lantern, gathered resistance in the empty space left by a recently razed boat shed. As I returned back and forth from the shack to the dock, the treasurer unexpectedly began to perform this manoeuvre of his own accord carrying this water again with me. As a gesture of support for the project that we had watched over together, there was an ease to this contribution. Whilst tending sensitively to the alterity that was entailed, the performance emerged from a trust built patiently over time.

famous on line

Following the events of *Continuous Wave*, I considered how my practice could be innovatively articulated in an art-dedicated context. *Line drawing* (2008) was a project curated for a university gallery and thus directly beholden to art institution processes and time frames. Institutional determinations can mitigate the kind of delays and intuitive responsiveness that brings the work into another realm of edgy and experimental possibility. In considering the role of intuition in my process, I adopt

Elizabeth Grosz's articulations on the ideas of Henri Bergson. Bergson's conceptions of intuition and virtuality suggest that by considering the virtual that only exists in time rather than only the spatially in objects, we might be able to engage in social action differently. 'The virtual is another name for the inherence of the past in

the present, for the capacity to become other'.¹¹ Intuition enables the instinctual connection to the sensory and the spatial, organisational insights of the intellect to come together and become orientated towards an opening up to the world.¹²

Akin to an aesthetic rather than to a scientific understanding, intuition is the close, intimate, internal comprehension of and immersion in the durational qualities of life'. 'To think intuitively is to think in duration...13

Fortunately, the informed insights of the curator enabled the installation to develop over a protracted period. Exploring three dimensional and performative drawing processes, my installation incorporated subverted and diverted second-hand theatre props. Elements accrued in the gallery at intervals and areas were activated through rearranging, editing, and creating patterns of motion and spatial articulation. I work actively toward ecologies of practice; performed "atmospheres" in concert with material already present in the everyday world. The choice to work with what is there is often mistaken for mannered incompetence. Instead it is a formally considered and thoughtfully enunciated process that refuses the rearticulation of seamless or refined production values to fit museum or market prescriptions. As such it is a process that moves with my sensibilities, beginning anew from each context.

During installation and on my way to the gallery, I recovered a comprehensively shattered acoustic guitar scattered along the street. I pondered the determinants of its fate; a dynamic performance that I could only imagine. In combination with a recycled shopping bag found in the same area, it regained spatial and conceptual integrity as a considered part of my installation.¹⁴ Umberto Eco's conception of the "open work" affects a:

...mutability... deployed within the specific limits of a given taste, or of predetermined formal tendencies, and is authorized by the concrete pliability of the material offered for the performer's [interpreter's, spectator's] manipulation.¹⁵

For Yves Lomax the formation of work is open in that it can never actually be contained at any one time and within one locale such as a gallery. Particularly resonant are her further evocations of "opening"; where lines imply temporal and spatial flux:

Think of making the art gallery a most untimely place. Think of making the lines break through and not settling for well established points. Think of all the lines that are involved.... in the formation of a gallery space [that] can never be contained in just one local place.¹⁶

As exemplar, the guitar contributed to a further aspect of the work's accretion. Earlier in my research I learnt of an emergent technology that turns sound waves into cold air. Thermo-acoustic refrigeration (TAR) may eventually determine a clean and sustainable way to refrigerate and air-condition all kinds of spaces.¹⁷ Briefly stated, TAR functions through a transfer of excited particles stimulated by (enclosed) highly amplified sound (frequency) waves and passed through a directional filter causing an exchange of hot air for cool. Developed in collaboration with academic and technical staff from Adelaide University Mechanical Engineering Department, *Air conditioner* (2008) was constructed as working desktop model turned installation component. Prompted by my "untimely witnessing" of the guitar "performance", and with a gallery assistant who is also an accomplished musician, guitar synthesiser-generated sounds were recorded. These samples were then arranged and digitally edited to form an original sound composition. Instead of employing a frequency wave machine, *Air conditioner* cooled to my music.¹⁸ *Line drawing* involved a suite of five related installation components with several "drawn" in the regions between disciplines and relating for particular durations to experts from other fields. Precise knowledge in physics and engineering was brought to bear on *Air conditioner*. While not accurate by scientific standards, in an art gallery

context, it was perhaps more a testament to and signifier of possibility; to remarkable latent or quiet competencies. Importantly, the work's materiality is the point of reference for all who experience it.

Jacques Rancière's inquiry into intellectual emancipation refers to the material artefact as a bridge of communication across which one verifies learning with another person. Rancière examines the propositions of post-revolutionary French educational philosopher Joseph Jacotot, who contends that even where contextual understandings are unknown, much can be learnt through material verification with the senses. In this evocation, the primary focus is on an honest accounting and recounting process of the "voyager" before a witness such that there is:

[n]o aggregation: the binding of one mind to another. There is intelligence where each person acts, tells what he [sic] is doing and gives the means of verifying the reality of his action.¹⁹

An investigation into Jacotot's conceptions of intellectual emancipation has currency here. While the artefact is fore-grounded as the bridge and the passage between two minds, it is also the means through which explication is rejected as harbinger of aggregation and the 'annihilation of one mind by another'.²⁰ Rancière's exploration of educational philosophy has a correlate in relations between artist and spectator where work 'addresses a spectator whose interpretive and emotional capacity is not only acknowledged but called upon'.²¹ Moreover, Rancière holds that art is politically and socially emancipating when it renounces its authority and ability to do so. Instead explorations of individual competence are prioritised:

...exceeding the system of represented groups [and] constituted identities ... in accordance with their importance in society such that a

rupture ... opens out into the recognition of the competence of anyone...22

scope

Oxymorons for a better life (scope) was sited at a recreation park in the Adelaide Hills and installed in a small square 19th century sandstone office. In the past the office housed scientific records for an adjacent experimental orchard. After many experiments with toxic pesticides the trees were felled and over time the contested vacancy claimed for public recreation. In consultation with local government the office space has recently been renovated and now functions as an independent art space. As such this place reveals a different kind of functioning economy.

Processes of “make-shift” and “make-do” can offer insights as “shaping” potentials in the varied rhythms and tenacious repetitions of everyday life. Having been part of the area reclaimed by local residents, *Seedling Art Space*²³ offers an alternative: a transgressive opening to another kind of rhythm and thought. The local people determine and activate things; they bring food for the art openings, they amble by and ask about the work; they invest. In this work, an enclosed window-to-window cardboard corridor (*scope*) breaches the office inviting other qualities of seeing and exchange. From the inside it is a significant obstruction, occluding much of the interior and creating a barrier to light and movement. Outside from either window, the enclosure becomes a sealed viewing aperture that surveys the intricacies and bearing of the observer’s relationship with light and the surrounding growth and decay. Over time, even brief periods of time, light relations are redrawn articulating some newer ecology.

Along an interior wall, *zest: the development of the heart in man [sic]* entails a shelved display of diminutive clay models. This second intervention references Adolf Ziegler’s mid nineteenth century wax models of developing embryo hearts that were originally sold in conjunction with A.Ecker’s *Atlas Icones physiologicae* (Leipzig 1851-59).²⁴ The models invite a concatenation of detached associations. Isolated organs based on profound interiority, each ‘part of one body

developing inside another' is far removed from its intimate and chronological origins.²⁵ Every model shaped as advance on a previous developmental stage, chronicles some long ago newborn or unborn loss. Like the character of history and nature in history, in this work I requisition kinds of substratum. The work attests the historicism of knowledge, representation and science, and in making obscure the conjunction between inside and outside intimates pressing ecological responsibilities; incipencies that demand more complex negotiations of the relations between previously hermetic regimes and epistemologies. Appropriation and signification of scientific models, props, and viewing devices and the associated performances articulate that potentiality. In this regard, the writing of scientific sociologist, Bruno Latour is insightful in establishing that:

[p]hilosophers... have been obsessed for much too long with objects and subjects, and not enough by air conditioning! Envelopes, spheres, skins, ambiances, these are the real conditions of possibility' that [it] has been trying to dig out of hopelessly inaccessible 'infrastructures'.²⁶

Furthermore Latour's neologism, "*factish*" is revealing in considering injunctions against interdisciplinarity. Factish reclaims the shared etymological origins of the two terms "fetish" and "fact" in order to reconsider the freedom of passage between the real and the constructed; the conceptions of artefact as fetish onto which beliefs and desires are projected and the "fact" of scientific reality.²⁷ According to Latour, factish recovers this link through the 'actions of the makers of both', such that "construction" and "autonomous reality" are identified as synonymous.²⁸ Latour posits that the opposition of the terms epistemology and ontology were formed 'in removing human agency from and attachment to the fabrication of facts *and* of fetishes'.²⁹ In reclaiming this association as 'a practical ontology', Latour suggests ways of uninhibited movement between territories such as science and art.³⁰

Philosopher of science, Isabelle Stenger's extensive writings about the potentials of interdisciplinary relations incorporate the term *cosmopolitics*. Cosmopolitics involves an ecology of practices such that in the disciplinary interstices cultural dialogue opens up new possibilities.³¹

...where there is life there are boundaries...practices may change through their relation with other practices, because a boundary is not a barrier, it connects the inside and the outside. If the outside changes, so will the inside, but not as a function of the outside, in its own manner. So you cannot interfere within but you can try to produce a difference...not to judge away as mere opinion what is outside their boundary.³²

For Stengers, that involves encounters that invite hope; encounters 'with things or people, or ideas that oblige her to think in new ways rather than bowing down to probable realities.'³³

Ecologies of practice allow for movement and possibilities beyond institutionalised systems of knowledge production and reductionist binary models of subject/object, production/ consumption, or active and passive involvement. This archive recovers no model of interdisciplinary practice, as it is beholden to contextual nuances and therefore acquires its possibilities accordingly. Having identified the mutability and temporal slippage in these interdisciplinary practices, it would be a moot point to invest in any closed or fixed spatial model of practice. Rather, in order to approach some generative context, I evoke instead an open temporal "climate". Such a climate would be conditioned by what is witnessed in looking away from a singular point of focus and "watching over" other performed and material practices. This zone might constitute an "inventive atmosphere" a climatic context both inside and outside; an in-between process that is serially self-defining. Thus events are enabled between boundaries; constructions of time or discipline in the zones of the possible, where preconceived ideas might well be at risk.

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