



COPYRIGHT AND USE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis must be used in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Reproduction of material protected by copyright may be an infringement of copyright and copyright owners may be entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

Section 51 (2) of the Copyright Act permits an authorized officer of a university library or archives to provide a copy (by communication or otherwise) of an unpublished thesis kept in the library or archives, to a person who satisfies the authorized officer that he or she requires the reproduction for the purposes of research or study.

The Copyright Act grants the creator of a work a number of moral rights, specifically the right of attribution, the right against false attribution and the right of integrity.

You may infringe the author's moral rights if you:

- fail to acknowledge the author of this thesis if you quote sections from the work
- attribute this thesis to another author
- subject this thesis to derogatory treatment which may prejudice the author's reputation

For further information contact the University's Copyright Service.

sydney.edu.au/copyright

THE DILETTANTE

The paradox of a professional artist working as an amateur

By

Anna McMahon

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts

at

Sydney College of the Arts,

University of Sydney.

2015



This thesis is dedicated to my mother, Coleen McMahon, for telling me that education was important, and for supporting me to get this far.

Acknowledgments

I would like to acknowledge the support and encouragement of my supervisor Cherine Fahd. I feel honoured to have had her guidance as an artist, supervisor and friend over the period of my candidature.

Thank you to the staff and postgraduate community of Sydney College of the Arts. The creative energy and caliber of my cohort has been a constant encouragement to strive for excellence.

Thank you especially to my dedicated network of family and friends. I would not have been able to complete this project without their encouragement and support. In particular I'd like to acknowledge Jessica Bradford, Harriet Body, Matt Endacott, Liam Mathers, Jonathan McBurnie, James Nguyen, Jessica Olivieri and Markela Panegyres. To Kate Beckingham for being the best collaborative partner you could ask for. I'd like to also express my gratitude to Salote Tawale for being a constant voice of reason.

Table of Contents

List of Illustrations	v
Abstract	vii
Research Paper	vii
Creative Work	vii
Introduction	1
Chapter One - Not Knowing	7
Part One - The Dilettante	7
Part Two – Camille Henrot	20
Part Three – Mark Dion	26
Chapter Two – Knowing	32
Part One - Flowers	32
Part Two – Symbolism	38
Part Three – Representation	44
Conclusion	49
Bibliography	52

List of Illustrations

Figure 1. <i>77 Million Paintings</i> , Brian Eno, 2013.	7
Figure 2. <i>Untitled # 7</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 – ongoing.....	9
Figure 3. <i>Untitled # 7</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	10
Figure 4. <i>Commission for James Turrell: A Retrospective</i> , Dr Lisa Cooper, 2015.	12
Figure 5. <i>Wrong</i> , John Baldessari, 1967.....	14
Figure 6. <i>Untitled # 6</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	16
Figure 7. <i>Heart of Darkness</i> , Camille Henrot, 2012.....	18
Figure 8. <i>A Lover's Discourse: Fragments</i> , Camille Henrot, 2012.....	20
Figure 9. <i>The return (a cosmological cabinet for New South Wales)</i> , Mark Dion, 2008.....	23
Figure 10. <i>Neukom Vivarium</i> , Mark Dion, 2006 – ongoing.....	24
Figure 11. <i>To the lovers of the true and the beautiful</i> , Anna McMahon, 2015.....	26
Figure 12. <i>Untitled Arrangement</i> , Akane Teshigahara, 2012.....	30
Figure 13. <i>Still life with flowers in a glass vase</i> , Jan Davidsz de Heem, 1650-83.....	34
Figure 14. <i>Untitled # 4</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	36

Figure 15. <i>Untitled # 4</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	37
Figure 16. <i>Untitled # 1</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	39
Figure 17. <i>Untitled # 1</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	39
Figure 18. <i>Untitled # 1</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014, from <i>The world is weary of me and I am weary of it</i> , 2014 - ongoing.....	39
Figure 19. <i>One and Three Chairs</i> , Joseph Kosuth, 1965.....	41
Figure 20. <i>A Pair of Shoes</i> , Vincent van Gogh, 1886.....	42
Figure 21. <i>You can have anything you want</i> , Anna McMahon, 2014.....	44

Abstract

Research Paper

This research paper presents historic and contemporary examples of artists who produce work that borrows techniques from other professional fields, thus positioning themselves as amateurs in the field from which they are borrowing. This process is examined through exploring the role of artist as dilettante. It proposes that there are various strengths in embracing dilettantism as a strategy, such as within freedom of expression; the provision of an unrestrained research voice; the reinterpretation of tradition without the constraint of traditional rules; the possibility of not knowing and having nothing to lose. Furthermore in relation to my own practice I explore issues of sexual polarity; success and failure; life and death; and personal historic symbolism. Through the lens of the dilettante I explore my practice and working methodology, contextualising it through the practices of artists such as John Baldessari, Mark Dion, Jan Davidsz de Heem, Camille Henrot, Joseph Kosuth, as well as the writings of, Theodor Adorno, Roland Barthes, Brian Eno, Sigmund Freud, Judith Halberstam and Rosalind Krauss.

Creative Work

My works *Untitled # 22*, *Untitled # 23*, *Untitled #24* and *Untitled # 25* were installed in the gallery space to create a dialogue on the paradox of the professional artist working as an amateur. Each work consisted of a number of different flowers in conjunction other everyday objects.

Introduction

In this thesis I will explore the dual roles I play as *professional artist* and *amateur florist*. Through these two roles my research goal has been to combine my analytical and creative skills as an artist with my limited ability as a florist working with plants and flowers. The nexus of the professional-amateur is explored and guided by the notion of *the dilettante*. The complex and unpredictable globalised nature of our fast paced society has meant terms such as ‘up-skilling’, ‘retraining’ and ‘professionalising’ have found great use in our everyday lexicon.¹ An obsession with rapid ‘professionalisation’ generally means that to function successfully in our world, even as an artist, one must be skilled, educated and professional. Conversely, *the dilettante* is defined as an ‘amateur’, the term often negatively characterising a person as someone who ‘dabbles’ in creative fields in a superficial way.

In this thesis I will present my interest in alternative readings of the dilettante, readings that offer more positive appraisals. Within my practice I have discovered that by working as a dilettante I have found freedom; the freedom found in failing and an approach to making art that is unrestrained by traditions and rules.

The term ‘dilettante’ was initially used to describe royalty or nobility who pursued activities in the field of creative arts, yet due to their financial security and position within society did not need to pursue their practice for financial gain.² Initially, the term did not carry negative connotations, and was in fact a badge of honor labeling the carrier as privileged enough to not need

1 Norman Amundson, Lauri Mills, and Barbara Smith, "Incorporating Chaos and Paradox into Career Development," *Australian Journal of Career Development* 23, no. 1 (2014).

2 Paul Fleming, *Exemplarity and Mediocrity: The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 86.
Ibid.

professional remuneration. In 1799 the German writers, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller explored the dilettante in their collection, *On Dilettantism, its uses and Detriment, Advice for Dilettantes and Artists* (1799). They specifically commented on the role of the dilettante in art, debating the potential consequences this approach might have on art.³ Through this text they jointly investigated the way in which ‘dilettantism’ is destructive, necessary, and productive for art. Drawing distinctions between ‘true’ artists and ‘mediocre’ artists, the debate on the value of the dilettante came to a halt when Goethe acknowledged his own position as a dilettante. He acknowledged this when he wrote: “Much I have tried...and neither learned nor achieved anything.”⁴ It is through the act of *trying to do something, but failing*, that Goethe is inspired to accept his dilettantism and embrace the possibility of not knowing.

A contemporary example of a self-declared dilettante is the American artist Mark Dion. His practice is focused on the ways in which prevailing ideologies manufactured, largely, by public institutions, shape our understanding of history, knowledge, and the natural world. ‘Dabbling’ in multiple areas of research Dion borrows techniques and working methodologies from anthropology, science and archeology to create artworks that question the distinctions between objective scientific methodology and personal subjective influences.⁵ Dion is interested in how art making is one of the last professions where the *professional artist* is able to make work as a dilettante. I will explore further how his practice embraces the methodologies of dilettantism within the context of professional arts practice in the first chapter of this thesis.

Like Dion I frame my practice-based research within this idea of the *professional dilettante*. My research is centered on this term, both as a descriptive label but more importantly as a methodology. A ‘professional’ is someone who is a knowledgeable expert in their field, and has

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid., 91.

achieved the required training, skillset and education for their profession. Clearly paradoxical by association the notion of the ‘professional’ sits opposite to the values and methodologies employed by the ‘dilettante’. Having joined these two disparate terms I use them in unison to describe my actions and processes as an artist. By superficially interpreting and employing skills from floristry, photography and sculpture, I have created works that respond to and embrace the position of the amateur-expert. There is a dormant failure that surrounds the methodology of the dilettante. In a society that rewards achievement, failure as a goal is paradoxical, and is certainly not considered an objective for most.⁶

The act of embracing failure has played a major part in my adult life. Identifying as bisexual, I embrace my failure at exclusive heterosexuality or homosexuality as a core part of my identity. Similarly to the collapse of binary positions offered by the *professional dilettante*, bisexuality signifies the collapse of sexual polarities. In the book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, American writer Judith Halberstam talks about failure as a value within the Queer experience. They states:

Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world. Failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well; for queers failure can be a style, to cite Quentin Crisp, or a way of life, to cite Foucault, and it can stand in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon ‘trying and trying again’. In fact, if success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.⁷

⁶ Failure is a major trope for many contemporary artists working today. In Australia artists such as Todd McMillan, Tom Polo, Anastasia Close and Tony Schwensen use failure as a methodological approach as well as the subject matter of the work.
⁷Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011). P2-33

The sentiments expressed by Halberstam are important when reflecting on my own practice. Rather than reading failure as being a negative defeat, I choose to read failure as a refusal of mastery. I use my already inherent identity failure and reflect this in my working methodology as a dilettante and the rewards offered in this context are immense. Not only do I not aim for success in its traditional sense, but through the freedom embraced by my dilettantism, and my queer identity, I am free to approach my practice unrestrained and with direct and uninhibited intention and authenticity. It is through my bisexual identity that I am drawn to use the paradox of the *professional dilettante* as a strategy within my practice.

My practice-based research is more speculation than a search for facts and through two aptly named chapters, 'Not Knowing' and 'Knowing' I will present my artwork and the ideas accompanying them. I aim to explore the multiple dimensions of the *professional dilettante* as it applies to my creative practice through historical and contemporary examples. In *Chapter One – Not Knowing*, I will begin by offering an explanation about the value of the dilettante and look at the renowned English artist, composer and musician Brian Eno. I explore the possibilities within Eno's definition of the dilettante in light of my own practice as a *dilettante florist/professional artist*. Further to this I examine the possibilities offered as a dilettante of using failure as a strategy, and relate this back to the implicit failure of my own sexuality. In the second part of this chapter I will examine the practice of French artist Camille Henrot as a *professional artist/dilettante Ikebana artist*. By deliberately rebelling against the rules outlined in Ikebana (the traditional Japanese practice of flower arranging), while also continuing to use this practice as a base for her sculptural and installation work, Henrot explores through the lens of a dilettante the role of flowers as highly codified cultural objects.⁸ Part three of this chapter will explore the work and practice of artist and *professional dilettante* Mark Dion. I will focus on his interest in the

⁸ I am also aware of the research on the sexuality of plants. See.....As so ans so states plants This is an interesting area of research however not pne that fits the scope and word count of this paper.

way art functions as a vehicle to explore other professions ‘in a professional way’. Finally, I will explore the symbolic coding and subsequent reading of flowers and their presentation in my own work.

In *Chapter Two – Knowing*, I will examine French theorist Roland Barthes 1977 seminar proposing a dossier on flowers. Over four points Barthes discusses the possible avenues of representation that flowers offer, and finally sums up by saying that it is because the presence of flowers is not questioned, that they should be questioned. A reading of flowers offered in a 1920s French anthropology, culture and art publication *Documents* by Georges Bataille follows this. In this account Bataille links the presentation of flowers as being similar to the presentation of the human ideal, that underneath an attractive exterior lays an unattractive reality. Conversely, I will then discuss the history of the Japanese art of Ikebana and the achievement of a higher state of consciousness offered through this practice. Finally, continuing on from this I will explore the traditional and historic role of Ikebana in Japanese culture and examine the work of contemporary Ikebana artist Akane Teshigahara.

I will also investigate the potential within flowers to be seen as readymade art objects and how these objects might relate and interact with the history of still life. In the second part of this chapter I will examine the history of the ‘still life’ through a work by 16th Century Dutch artist Jan Davidsz de Heem, and relate the use of personal symbolism within my own work to this tradition. Finally, I will investigate the use of photography within my practice (this is what I am ‘trained’ in) and explore the concept of the indexical relationship between the photograph and its referent. I will relate this concept to the work of American artist Joseph Kosuth in his presentation of *One and Three Chairs* (1965) where I will look at how this presentation through multiple formats relates to themes of still life and implied and implicit meaning and symbolism.

Throughout this paper I will discuss the development of my practice through the lens of the artist as *professional dilettante*. I acknowledge that whilst I chose the path of investigation that is examined in this paper, there are various other areas of research that, although applicable, fall outside the scope and length of this paper. Perspectives on new materialism, feminist theory and research into site and space would have also been relevant to my thesis.

Chapter One - Not Knowing

Part One - The Dilettante

In an interview recording for the album *From Brussels with Love* (1980), English artist, composer and musician Brian Eno, declares his position as a self confessed dilettante.

For me the great strength of dilettantism is that it tends to come in from another angle [...] an intelligent dilettante will not be constrained by the limitations of what's normally considered possible; he won't be frightened, he's got nothing to lose.⁹

Eno draws on the career of iconic American painter Mark Rothko to make his point suggesting that being constrained to one format and being known as working within one medium, such as Rothko with his abstract expressionist painting, seems ultimately uninteresting. In the same interview, Eno states that he thinks of himself as a “sound painter” and says that he generally only has a vague idea of what he is trying to do going into, or coming out of his studio. According to Eno many of his artistic decisions are determined by whether or not he likes something.¹⁰ Unlike the dilettante of Goethe's description that draws strength from not knowing, for Eno, dilettantism is a statement of individual artistic interpretation and freedom.

In his work *77 million paintings* (2013) (Figure 1), Eno created an immersive audiovisual installation. Using a “generative art” software program he aimed to create an artwork with

⁹ Brian Eno, "An Interview with Brian Eno," in *From Brussels With Love* (Les Disques Du Crépuscule, 1980).

¹⁰ Ibid.

endless slow visual permutations. In this work the slow transition between different layers of imagery requires the audiences extended attention and patience. Eno was interested in the possibility of each audience member viewing the work at a unique stage in its existence with a unique image accompanying each stage. He stated that he liked the idea of making an immersive environment that would result one thing growing into another thing in a similar way to a garden. “A gardener doesn’t specify the garden exactly, they put some seeds in and how the garden develops depends on a lot of other contingencies that happen in the lifetime. In a sense the gardener loses control of the situation.”¹¹ As a dilettante, Eno approaches this work with not only a sense of artistic freedom, but with the aim to explore the possibility of endless potential artistic mutations. He is unrestricted in his approach to art as a dilettante, and in this particular example the work is also unrestricted in its possible presentations.

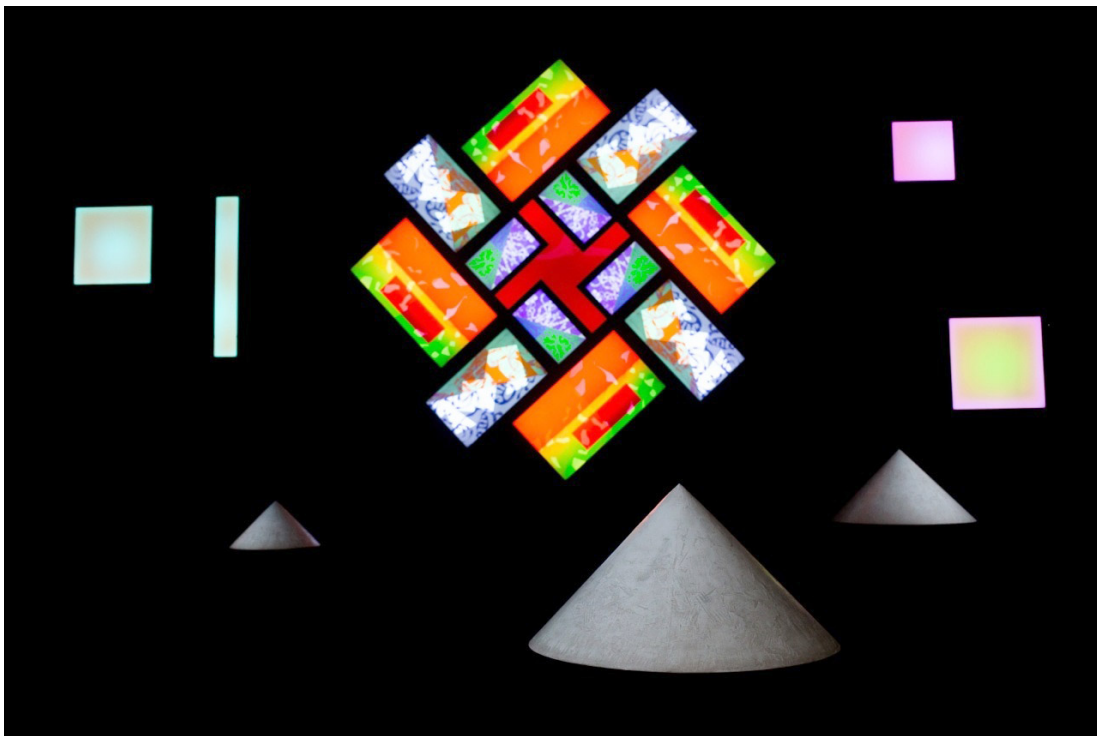


Figure 1. Brian Eno, *77 Million Paintings*, 2013. Audiovisual installation. Red Bull Music Academy. Source: <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/brian-enos-77-million-paintings-creates-mesmerizing-art-before-your-eyes>. (Accessed 20th March 2015).

¹¹ *Red Bull Music Academy Presents Brian Eno: An Illustrated Talk 2013* (The Great Hall, Cooper Union, New York 2013).

Growing up in rural Queensland, my first engagement with contemporary art was in my early twenties at the Tate Modern in London preceding the quintessential ‘Aussie Contiki tour of Europe’. Prior to this I was studying a dual degree in Mechatronic Engineering and Mathematics and becoming rapidly absorbed in a field of wrong or right answers. The possibilities that contemporary art offered in comparison to this field of study and research seemed unrestricted and immense. I decided that the world of wrong or right answers was not something that would sustain my curiosity and enrolled to study art. As I had no background in high-school visual arts, throughout my undergraduate education I felt as though I was an amateur (perhaps most people feel like this). Having now engaged in postgraduate education in this field I have come to realise that even the most experienced artists are often plagued by doubts regarding proficiency and professionalism. In this context thinking about my arts practice as a professional dilettante offers a level of comfort and relief. Acting as a dilettante with regard to my art making, I relinquish the possibility of being considered an expert in any particular medium, I relinquish the possibility of ever knowing. Conversely, by calling myself a professional I establish that my dilettantism is intentional as a strategy for my arts practice.

In an ongoing series of work, *The world is weary of me, and I am weary of it* (2014 -2015), I create site-specific and personally reflective floral installations that draw upon the artistic freedom of not knowing. The dominant use of flowers within this series is important when considering my own sexuality, and exploring the narratives around these arrangements. The sexuality of flowers is a complex area of botany and whilst I am interested in this area of study, I am unable to explore the various sexual behavior of flowers and plants within the scope of this paper. What is

important to mention here is that the use of flowers for their obvious display of sexuality was a conscious decision.¹²

In *Untitled #7* (2014) (Figure 2 & 3), I have explored the push and pull between failure and success that underlies my experience as a dilettante florist and a professional artist. The iconic American basketball hoop plays host to two foxtail lilies being held up by the downward pressure of the basketball that sits in the hoop. Through this installation I aim to display a state of balance between potential ambition and latent failure. The fact that the ball does not go anywhere and is held in a state of flux between continuity and stillness is important in expressing this paradox. Positioned in a cross sword configuration, the foxtail lilies' fronds recall the tradition of dueling, and represent this meeting point between ambition and failure.¹³ Over time the fronds decay (Figure 3) and the ball becomes dislodged, the net closing up from the pull of the flaccid lilies at its base. The deterioration of the once strong stalk transforms slowly into a soft form, limp with decay. I value the performance that occurs in this slow, drawn out cycle. Rather than having full control of my material, I set up the flowers and allow them to carry out their own fate.

¹² The use of the orchids in particular throughout my practice I choose for their history within western culture. During the mid 1800s orchids became a highly desired collectors item with a the title 'Orchidelirium' being used to describe this period of orchid madness. During this time women were often forbidden to view these orchids as they were considered to be too sexually suggestive for the female constitution. My specific use of the phalaenopsis type of orchid makes reference to my own sexuality and gender as this type of orchid is classified as being 'bisexual' or 'perfect' as it is able to pollinate and reproduce asexually.

¹³ Aptly, the floral meaning of the foxtail lily is "endurance", and dueling is traditionally a sport of endurance where each participant needs to stand their ground without giving way. Furthermore, endurance also conjures feelings of sufferance and eventual fortune, which of course adds to the general theme of failure and success.



Figure 2. *Untitled # 7*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Foxtail lilies, basketball hoop and ball. 100 x 100 cm.



Figure 3. *Untitled # 7*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Foxtail lilies, basketball hoop and ball. 100 x 100 cm.

The paradox of the professional dilettante suggests I am at once experienced in something, in this case art making, whilst being an amateur at something else – floristry. I produce these arrangements without having engaged in any formal training in floristry. I am a dilettante florist. I am unaware of the professional practice, context and methodologies employed by this profession. Waking up to attend the flower markets at 4:00 am, I engage in this industry with the awkwardness of an amateur. I am a complete dilettante in this setting, with only superficial knowledge of flower names, and even less knowledge about the way in which business is conducted in this setting. I feel both out of place and in my element at the flower market. I am different to the professionals there, looking for one or two flowers to fulfill my arrangement rather than thinking about economy, sales and customers. I do not use a van loaded with buckets and trolleys and I do not have long lasting relationships with flower growers. Whilst I am drawn to particular flowers for their individual and unique qualities, I am blissfully unaware of the quality of the flower I am selecting from an experts point of view. I don't know what is in season, or what is out of season, or how long something might last for. I superficially engage in this industry.

Once I leave the markets, I take something that is already loaded with cultural or personal symbolism and grouping the flowers with these objects, present the final arrangement within the context of a gallery. This process is not dissimilar to the tradition of the readymade, a topic which I will come to discuss later. The beauty of fresh flowers does not last long of course, as cut flowers reach their end very quickly. In this work, rather than replenishing the flowers through the exhibition period, I allow the flowers to decay and die. This quality combined with the seasonal nature of flowers ensures that I am unable to fully reproduce my floral installations for subsequent exhibitions. Hence the work on view in the exhibition that accompanies this thesis is both partially reproduced and new work operating under the same principles discussed in this paper.

Influential Sydney florist Saskia Havekes of Grandiflora is well known for hiring artists. One previous recruit, Lisa Cooper worked for Grandiflora whilst completing her PhD in Fine Arts from College of Fine Arts, the University of New South Wales. Cooper now operates her own floristry business under the name, Doctor Cooper Studio. With her background and training in fine arts Cooper uses flowers to create grand floral sculptures such the commission by the National Gallery of Australia for the opening of *James Turrell: A Retrospective* (Figure 4) (2015). Despite this arrangement being shown in the same site as this exhibition, it was not given the status of artwork, but was created for the opening night event as a celebratory offering. This calls into question the function and place of flowers and floral arrangements as a symbolic and ritualistic gesture, and their potential or lack thereof to fulfill the expectations of art. The ephemeral nature of flowers and their strong associations with domesticity and decoration does not allow them the same permanence as other traditional modes of art making.



Figure 4. Dr Lisa Cooper, *Commission for James Turrell: A Retrospective*, 2015. Source: <http://exploregram.com/artist-doctor-lisa-cooper-for-the-james-turrell-retrospective-at-the-national/> (Accessed 10th May 2015).

The fate of the flowers to decay and die piques my interest in the notion of failure. Flowers at the moment of presentation are destined to always fail. As discussed in the introduction, I embrace my position as a dilettante due to the implicit failure of my own sexuality. There is a paradox involved in deliberately trying to fail and even when I set out to fail, the possibility of success is never fully removed, and hence the possibility of failure is once again established.¹⁴ Failure in art making has long been celebrated by artists. I have long enjoyed the work of American artist John Baldessari. He comically explored notions of failure and success in his

¹⁴ Lisa Le Feuvre, *Failure*, Documents of Contemporary Art (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press ; Whitechapel Gallery, 2010).

work *Wrong* (1967) (Figure 5). This ‘wrong’ photograph shows the artist standing in front of a palm tree so that it appears to be growing out of his head. Making reference to the protocols of amateur photography and the rules of composition, the “wrongness” of the image implies the doctrine of “rightness” outlined by centuries of Western Art. The fact that most amateur photographers would automatically shoot this image in the “right” composition differentiates this work from that of normal amateur, to that of the intentional amateur or dilettante. His intention to position himself as a dilettante and to point out the failure in his work renders the work successful.¹⁵

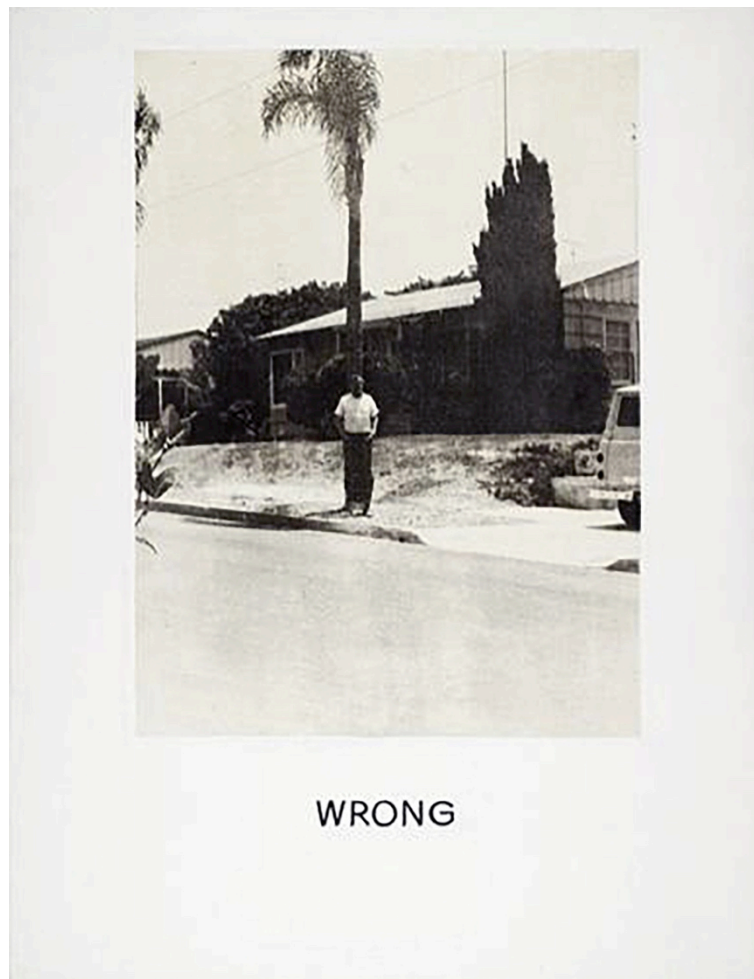


Figure 5. John Baldessari, *Wrong*, 1967. Photoemulsion with acrylic on canvas. 149.86 x 114.3 cm. Los Angeles County Museum of Art. <http://collections.lacma.org/node/237769> (Accessed 10th March 2015)

¹⁵ Ibid., P14.

Baldessari speaks about failure in Sarah Thornton's book *Seven Days in the Art World* (2009). "Art comes out of failure... You have to try things out. You can't sit around, terrified of being incorrect, saying 'I won't do anything until I do a masterpiece.'"¹⁶ Similar to Goethe's acceptance of the reality of 'not knowing', rather than being afraid of what might happen, accepting the possibility of failure for Baldessari constitutes a certain freedom. For Baldessari embracing the possibility and potential of failure is the point from which his work is made.

¹⁶ Sarah Thornton, *Seven Days in the Art World*, Norton pbk. ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 2009), P52.

In my work *Untitled # 6* (2014) (Figure 6) from the series, *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, I created a floral installation in response to my recollections of failure as a child and adolescent and in regard to my bisexuality. In this artwork I bound together both red and green kangaroo paw using gardening wire, and then placed this now extended length of foliage between a small glass Lavabo dish, more commonly known as a finger bowl at the corner of the gallery. Having grown up in a rural and traditional Catholic family, I remember the feelings of immense failure and confusion I had sustained when realising that I was not only heterosexual, but also homosexual. It seemed impossible that I could be both, and neither. Consequently, these feelings also led to my own desire to suppress this side of me, and focus on my heterosexuality. I saw myself as a fraud and a dilettante in both heterosexual and homosexual worlds. Without being able to identify exclusively as either sexual orientation, I was an amateur at both. This work aimed to express some of these feelings of confusion, rejection and escapism. The finger bowl used in this work refers to the obligatory cleansing of sins carried out by Catholic priests prior to touching the body of Christ, whereby through the ritual act of washing their fingertips in the bowl - they are cleansed. As an altar server for many years in my youth, I would be the person who would hold this bowl for the Priest whilst this ritual was carried out. For many years I thought perhaps my own faith, my own belief in the power of this type of spiritual purity and cleansing, could lead me out of my own feelings of failure. Conversely, the symbolism around a finger bowl is intended to be read as referencing the sexual act involved in lesbian sex. The juxtaposition of these two readings speaks about my perceived failure in being bisexual. Additionally, the use of kangaroo paw with its hard wooded branch, but velvety smooth and delicate flower was also intended to imply a male/female gender paradox.



Figure 6. *Untitled # 6*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Kangaroo paw, finger bowl and garden wire. 120 x 100 cm.

Part Two – Camille Henrot

French artist Camille Henrot approaches her practice as a dilettante florist. Leaving room for intentional naivety she creates floral sculptures based on the Japanese art of Ikebana but without concern for the rules and teachings outlined by this age-old practice.¹⁷ Using Ikebana as a base, the presence of such errors within this codified art form fit within Henrot's overarching desire to present ideas of dilettantism to her audience. Interested in creating new rituals from existing belief systems, Henrot presents her arrangements as a way of establishing continuity in an age of temporality. For example, through her practice she presents antidotes for the anxiety of living "in history".¹⁸ In an ongoing study under the collective title, *Is It Possible To Be A Revolutionary and Like Flowers?* (2012 - ongoing) Henrot creates floral compositions in with intuitive, poetic and representational response to literature. One composition, *Heart of Darkness* (2012) (Figure 7), she has assembled a combination of New Zealand Flax and *Aspidistra* from Vietnam, encased in a military jacket. Her arrangement is based on the novel, *Heart of Darkness* by Polish-English writer Joseph Conrad. In this text Conrad explored ideas of the uncivilised versus the civilised, as well as issues surrounding colonialism and racism, versus European imperialism. Picking up on this theme, Henrot has brought together coloured and textured plant material at different stages of life (some green and alive, some dry and dead) and combines them with camouflage material at the base of the work. Henrot is referencing the jungle setting of Conrad's epic novel. By placing inside the military jacket, flora from colonised countries, it could be said that Henrot is also commenting on the contemporary reading of the book as being xenophobic, and the de-humanising of African people.

¹⁷ I will explore the art of Ikebana in Chapter Two of this paper.

¹⁸ Cecilia Alemani, "'Relations De Traduction', Interview with the Artist," *Mousse*, no. 35 (October - November 2012).



Figure 7. Camille Henrot, *Heart of Darkness*, 2012, from *Is it possible to be revolutionary and like flowers?*, 2011–ongoing. Ikebana arrangement, dimensions variable. Courtesy: © the artist, ADAGP, Paris, and Kamel Mennour, Paris. Photograph: Alexandra Serrano.

Another example of 'literature becoming arrangement' is in her work *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (2012) (Figure 8), based on the book of the same name by Roland Barthes. This arrangement features two South American pineapples hooked together by elastic rope, with a long stem of cockscomb in between. The assemblage speaks of love between two connected elements and reflects the sentiments set out in the literature. In the language of flowers, giving someone a pineapple is akin to telling them that they are perfect. It is also a very well known symbol of hospitality and welcome. The cockscomb represents arrogance or selfishness. By positioning the cockscomb in the middle of these two linked symbols of perfection Henrot presents the major theme within the book, of the anxiety and self doubt experienced when "in love" with another. The fragility of love and the internal conflict over how to deal with the "other", as well as how to deal with the eventual misery of lost love, can be seen in the unstable but flexible elastic connections between the two pineapples, and the rupturing of this connection with the ego of the cockscomb. As these flowers eventually die, the only remaining element is the elastic rope connection. Likewise, as relationships end it could also be said that all that is left behind is the remains of the bond of love that once connected the two. Henrot's practice is an act of explaining complex ideas through simple materials and forms.



Figure 8. Camille Henrot, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, 2012, from *Is it possible to be revolutionary and like flowers?*, 2011–ongoing. Ikebana arrangement, dimensions variable. Courtesy: © the artist, ADAGP, Paris, and Kamel Mennour, Paris. Photograph: Fabrice Seixas.

Paying homage to the history of Ikebana, Henrot engages superficially in its practice without the restraint of adhering to its language, while having an understanding of it. Writer Dan Fox comments on the connection that Henrot makes with Ikebana: “It is an act of translation, of recoding literature and giving it a form that privileges impermanence, the everyday and the domestic. Her approach to ikebana has been one of mastering codes, then breaking them in

order to make the arrangements her own.”¹⁹ Henrot herself explains in an interview conducted for *Plant Magazine* that she was specifically interested in Sogetsu Ikebana because its founder, Sofu Teshigahara, was very interested in contemporary art, transforming the art into something more creative.²⁰ By superficially engaging in the highly skilled art of Ikebana, Henrot makes the deliberate decision to position herself as a dilettante Ikebana artist, but a highly professional, eloquent and interesting contemporary artist.

Similarly, by taking an unskilled approach to the application of flowers into sculptural arrangements, I have in my own practice embraced the position of not knowing. Unlike my past practice that came from a traditional photographic base, I am now liberated from traditions and conventions through the fact that I have yet to study ‘the art’ of flower arrangement. By alleviating myself from the restrictions of knowledge, I allow myself to engage in an intuitively led practice while expecting simple outcomes. Rather than adhering to rules of historic principles, I allow myself as the artist to make spontaneous decisions and act in an intuitive manner.²¹ One could say that my methodology as an artist is led by my intuition. Likewise, Henrot also acknowledges that her practice is led by intuition.

“It is a mix of intuition and information. A little bit like the art of calligraphy: you practice a thousand times and then the actual action only takes a few minutes and has to be performed in a relaxed, intuitive but focused mood. After intense research, thinking, writing about the project I decided to follow my intuition, to be as free/unexpected as possible.”²²

19 Dan Fox, "Known Unknowns," *Frieze*, no. 161 (March 2014).

20 Amy Sherlock, "Camille Henrot. Les Fleurs Du Mal," *The Plant*, no. 6 (2014).

21 This naive position does not come without its problems. It is important for me to engage professionally in my practice as a dilettante as within my approach as an amateur there is always the potential for cultural faux pas to occur. The professional within the paradox of the professional dilettante is integral in ensuring that my practice has integrity.

²² Camille Henrot, interview by Maaïke Lauwaert, 2014.

Relying on her intuition, Henrot makes aesthetic decisions about her work based on her training and research background as an artist, coupled with her own intuition. Philosopher Henri Bergson posed the following explanation of intuition in his lecture titled *Philosophical Intuition*.

“What is this intuition? If the philosopher has not been able to give the formula for it, we certainly are not able to do so. But what we shall manage to recapture and to hold is a certain intermediary image between the simplicity of the concrete intuition and the complexity of the abstractions which translate it.”²³

My decision to use flowers as a core material in my practice relates to the paradox within intuition, as flowers themselves are intrinsically paradoxical. They are ephemeral, performative, surprising, stagnant, inconsistent, common, everyday, rare, luxurious, free, seasonal, in a state of flux, and going no where. As a material, they are already loaded with symbolism and questions. For an artist, they offer an ever-changing pallet of potential avenues of visual investigation and exploration. They are a presentation of the core ideas of dilettantism, as they are naturally inconsistent (no two flowers are identical) and contingent on the seasonal changes. Flowers are also destined to die, so as an art making material they are from the outset destined to fail.

²³ Henri Bergson, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and John Maoilearca, *Key Writings*, Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers (New York: Continuum, 2002).

Part Three – Mark Dion

As presented in the introduction of this paper Mark Dion engages in his practice as a professional dilettante. In an interview conducted for the radio show *Bad at Sports*, Dion explains why he is interested pursuing the methodology of a dilettante.

I like to imagine a way to rescue the (sic) term dilettante and bring it back to the society of dilettante's, the society of Goethe and Schiller were a part of and which really was a group of people interested in everything - so as interested in colour theory, as they are in literature and poetry, as they are in theology, as they are in natural history. And a lot of my work kind of does harken back to a moment where there is a collapse of disciplines, to this time where the artist, the scientist, the poet, the theologian was the same person.²⁴

Dion is interested in being an artist because he is able to act as a dilettante through this profession. He explains that the vocabulary that an artist engages with is far greater than that of specific disciplines. An artist can engage in the field of study, using a vocabulary that is off limits to that field. An example of this would be the use of humour or irony within an artwork that explore or discuss a particular field of science.

The expanded field of Science has been an area which Dion has based much of his practice and research. In his work *The return (a cosmological cabinet for New South Wales)* (2008) (Figure 9), Dion sent a number of packages to the Art Gallery of New South Wales that contained a,

²⁴ Duncan MacKenzie, Richard Holland, and Brian Andrews, eds., *Episode 251: Mark Dion*, *Bad at Sports* (2010).

“cosmological assemblage rooted in the classical traditions of taxonomy.”²⁵ In this work Dion aims to return to Australia items that were mined and exported to Europe for research in the disciplines of biology, geology and anthropology. Dion is also interested in expressing through the vehicle of science very complex ideas of human life and death.



Figure 9. Mark Dion, *The return (a cosmological cabinet for New South Wales)*, 2008. Jarrah bookcase, unopened posted packages, drawing. Art Gallery of New South Wales. Source: <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/323.2008.a-c/> (Accessed: 10th May 2015)

In his work *Neukom Vivarium* (2006 - ongoing) (Figure 10), Dion installed an 18-metre Western Hemlock nurse log into a 24-metre greenhouse. A nurse log is a tree that in its death provides a new ecosystem housing bacteria, fungi, insects, lichen and plants. Having collected this log from the site outside Seattle where it had fallen ten years earlier, Dion reconstructed the delicate circumstances of the ecosystem that had surrounded the tree in the new setting of the Olympic

²⁵ Art Gallery of New South Wales, "Collection: Mark Dion " <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/323.2008.a-c/>.

Sculpture Park in Seattle. In this work Dion employs the language of science to make an exhibition dealing with our natural world, that was not about a particular finished object, but about the process of the ecology of the nurse log, and the changing, slow performance that is carried out throughout its life span.²⁶



Figure 10. Mark Dion, *Neukom Vivarium*, 2006 – ongoing. Western Hemlock nurse log. Seattle Art Museum – Olympic Sculpture Park. Photograph: Ryan Hadley

²⁶ Joanna Marsh, "A Conversation with Mark Dion," *American Art* 23, no. 2 (2009).

By showcasing this process of evolving and changing life and death cycles, Dion wanted to point at broader questions regarding society's unwillingness to deal with the inescapable question of age and death. In the same interview for the radio show *Bad at Sports*, Dion states in relation to *Neukom Vivarium*,

I want to create a situation that does effect people - but not necessarily through a checklist of facts that they might learn through an encounter - but that creates a nagging unease, that creates a moment of irritation, that motivates something as intangible as melancholy.²⁷

By embracing his position as a dilettante Dion opens up the possibility of using research areas such as science and biology to explore and present complex ideas. It is Dion's intention that his work is interpreted as art, rather than as science, and it is through his actions as a dilettante scientist and botanist that he exhibits this work. His acceptance of the failure and shortfalls of the dilettante - the advantages of not being an expert, are brought into focus as he establishes meaning through the vocabulary of contemporary art.

Dion does not employ a studio-based practice, but rather produces his work with a site-specific or project specific responsive approach. He sees himself as a troubleshooter who is brought in to present a new viewpoint.²⁸ In close proximity to the working methodology employed by Dion, my own practice is structured around site-specific or project specific outcomes. As cut flowers are unable to sustain any great length of time, developing my work through a traditional studio-based methodology is not tenable. I find great joy in developing my work with a site-specific approach, and working within the architecture and setting or environment that the work

²⁷ MacKenzie, Holland, and Andrews, *Episode 251: Mark Dion*.

²⁸ Art 21 Exculsive, *Mark Dion: Methodology* (2008).

will be placed ultimately informs many of my decisions. Further to this, as my material is seasonally variable my practice also has to accommodate for a seasonal specificity.

In my work *To the lovers of the true and the beautiful* (2015) (Figure 11) I created a site-specific work with pineapple lilies and found objects as part of the exhibition *Friends with Benefits* at the gallery Twenty-Thirty-Seven. Twenty-Thirty-Seven is an artist run gallery facilitated out of artist Christopher Dolman's house in Glebe. Having found two flag holding struts at the house on a previous visit, I bound these two struts together with rubber bands, and positioned two flower stems in them so they would sit parallel to each other. The two solid structures were being held in place by rubber bands to prevent the potential for movement, while also providing a potential for breakage. They were, in the end, at odds and apposed to each other, going in different directions naturally, but held together for the time being. My intention for this arrangement was to express feelings I had experienced regarding failed relationships. I wanted to present the push and pull of being in a relationship, the energy used to stay together, and the resistance and push of conflict.



Figure 11. *To the lovers of the true and the beautiful*, 2015. Pineapple lilies, rubber bands and found objects. 60 x 20 cm.

The latent domesticity within my practice was an essential component in Dolman's decision to include my work in this exhibition. The house as setting for this work led to an inherent examination of cohabitation, intimacy and displacement. Looking at their presence in this dual setting of a house and gallery, this work not only questioned the presence of flowers generally, but the question of flowers as art object, sculpture and performance. Whilst the two flowers were together, they were both destined to meet their end alone.

Chapter Two – Knowing

Part One - Flowers

Created to attest to the luxury of the plant, a flower's purpose is to attract the insect that will aid in its reproduction. An arrangement of flowers is an impermanent sculpture - a dragged out performance of the beautiful and the ugly. As an object, and for the audience, the floral arrangement is firstly a reminder of the love and comfort of life - the simple pleasures. They recall a celebration of love and of life. Conversely they also bring about memories of death and illness, of our own mortality and decay – the inevitable: life leads to death. It is through the questioning of flowers within contemporary life that they come to be viewed as representations of societal standing, desire and ideals.

In his seminar from March 16, 1977, Roland Barthes proposes a dossier on flowers consisting of 4 points.²⁹ The first point asserts that flowers are associated with the myth of paradise as “gardens = paradises”. The idea of paradise that Barthes refers to is that suggested by Ancient Greek historian Xenophon, that the King of Persia's vast oriental gardens were paradise.³⁰ He states that gardens, and subsequently flowers, constitute a “top-end produce and pleasure”.³¹ The second point Barthes makes is that flowers are an offering to the gods - that thematically flowers are the opposite of a carnal offering, they offer a ritual without victim, and act as a presentation of a modest economy of luxury. The third point is that flower arrangements act as

29 Roland Barthes, *How to Live Together : Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*, European Perspectives (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), P86.

30 Xenophon et al., *The Whole Works of Xenophon : Complete in One Volume* (London: Jones & co., 1832), P651-52.

31 Barthes, *How to Live Together : Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*.

objects incorporated into symbolic practices. The Japanese flower arranging practice of Ikebana or Kado for example offers a complex symbolic system of production and meaning through flowers.³² The fourth point that Barthes offers as the final piece of his dossier is that flowers are colour and as such have a culturally coded offering. Barthes also points out that flowers “go without saying”, that they are accepted for what they are without question of what they represent. It is for this understanding that Barthes expresses the need for a ‘dossier’ of enquiry – that things that are easily accepted, are often the things that need to be looked at closely.

Although I am interested in all four notions presented by Barthes, in the context of my own practice I am mainly concerned with his third and final notions. As explained in his third point, flower arrangements act as objects incorporated into symbolic practices. I approach art making as one such symbolic practice and imbue my sculptural/floral arrangements with personal symbolism, a system of meaning. The final point that Barthes states is that flowers “go without saying” and hence should be questioned is also of great importance to my practice. My questioning concerns what flowers can become in the context of a contemporary art gallery. They cannot “go without saying” in the context of the gallery as art object. Their presence is questioned in their relationship to space and place. The presence of flowers ‘as art’ changes their everyday use and meaning.

In the third issue of the 1920s anthropology, culture and art publication *Documents*, director Georges Bataille wrote an article about flowers and their relationship to society and human ideals.³³ Bataille begins his writing by acknowledging the common symbolic value of flowers as signifiers for love and beauty. However, Bataille later goes on to say that flowers are only

32 Ibid., P87.

33 Cecilia Alemani, "The Language of Flowers," in *Camille Henrot* ed. Cecilia Alemani, et al. (Paris: K. Mennour, 2013), P13.

beautiful in our collective imagination as they conform to a representation of the human ideal.³⁴ He suggests that as soon as you remove the petals from the flower all that remains is the unpleasant stem and tuft. What Bataille is suggesting is that flowers present, on the outset, a beautiful and pure object. Because they are beautiful, they are accepted and read by society as such.

In contrast to the ideas presented by Bataille, the ancient practice of Ikebana, or Kado believes the potential for an arrangement of flowers to present the beauty and essence of life.³⁵ Whilst many systems and styles of Ikebana have evolved over time, the overarching aim of this tradition is to grasp the “art of living itself”³⁶. The roots of this tradition are anchored in Buddhist worship rituals involving the presentation of flowers. In Japanese Buddhist temples during the sixth century, large floral arrangements began to appear on both sides of the altars. By the tenth century Ikebana was considered an art form independent of its religious origins despite maintaining strong symbolic and spiritual reference. Originally only members of nobility were able to practice Ikebana, but gradually it spread to people from all social levels in Japanese society. Various schools, systems and styles of Ikebana developed between the tenth and fifteenth century with rules and guidelines as well as texts detailing secret principles and discoveries of different schools being written. The oldest text on record is The Sendensho, dated 1445 which detailed a series of rules and explanations, examining things such as, which flowers should be used on which occasions and which to avoid, as well as details on arrangement placement in a room or setting.³⁷ It was thought that by using these rules, those practicing

34 Ibid.

35 H. E. Davey, *The Japanese Way of the Artist*, Michi: Japanese Arts and Ways (New York: Stone Bridge Press, 2012), P357-58.

36 Ibid., P350.

37 Shozo Sato, *Ikebana: The Art of Arranging Flowers* (Kanagawa: Tuttle Publishing,, 2012), P21.

Ikebana could reach a clearer state of consciousness. In the book *The Japanese Way of the Artist*, H.E Davey examines Ikebana within the system of Kado.³⁸

In kado, one finally observes a flower in a state of such heightened awareness that no distinction exists between the observer and the observed. And in that instant, one realises the essence of existence in a single petal poised between life and death.³⁹

By practicing these rules, and refining this highly symbolic practice it is only the highly skilled and experienced artists that can create a true Ikebana arrangement. Through the combination of the artist's ki or energy and connectedness to the universe, combined with the ki of the arrangement, a true work of Ikebana is achieved.

An example of this practice can be seen in the arrangement by Akane Teshigahara from February 2012, seen in Figure 12. Teshigahara states of her arrangement that, "Jasmine and lilies vigorously reach up out of the vase of plain texture. Their vitality in rising upward is emphasised by neatening the base."⁴⁰ Lillies are prescribed with the symbolic meaning of the release of life after death, and Jasmine as presenting purity and joy. The room between these bare branches of Jasmine, coupled with the explosion of colour and form offered at the center of the arrangement by the lilies inspires a feeling of release through movement, and stillness. Seen together this arrangement could be read as symbolically representing the release of a soul after death. The choice to use a plane vase for this arrangement with natural coloring ultimately grounds the arrangement and draws it back down to the earth from which it came.

38 Davey, *The Japanese Way of the Artist*.

39 Ibid., P381.

40 Akane Teshigawara, *Untilted Arrangement*, 2012.



Figure 12. Akane Teshigahara, *Untitled Arrangement*, 2012. Jasmine, Lillies and Ceramic Vase. Source: Sogetsu and Akane Teshigahara Image Gallery, <http://www.sogetsu.or.jp/e/akane/ikebanaphoto/#> (Accessed 10th March 2015).

It is important to add here that during my MFA candidature I received Postgraduate Research Support Funding to study a short one on one course under an Ikebana Master in Sydney. Having paid for the course, I still did not attend, as I feared that by doing so it may alter my ability to practice and embrace the unknown offered by my position as a dilettante, that my practice will become known.⁴¹ Studying Ikebana posed the threat of unraveling my MFA research as a whole. I feared that by engaging in this course I would become too trained and too aware of the rules, and hence bridge the gap that currently exists between being a trained Ikebana floral artist, and being an artist engaging in amateur floristry. Not knowing the rules and not knowing the specific symbolism, but rather using created symbolism and my own artistic approach may in fact be the boundary where my practice as an artist is retained. In this context,

⁴¹ Although, I do aim to complete this course once I have finished my MFA.

if I extend out of the circle of the dilettante I risk my practice being considered to be a form of floristry, rather than art.

What I have learnt from Ikebana is the intuitive selection of 'readymade' branches and flowers. An example of this in Ikebana is the sparseness of jasmine flowers and the spread of the branch used in the arrangement shown above by Teshigahara. The space between the smaller vertical branches is unique, as a 'branch' it may simply constitute a 'readymade' object. Likewise, by going to the flower market and choosing specific unique flowers for my works, I nevertheless employ them for their readymade status. Marcel Duchamp proposed the following with regard to the readymade.

Another aspect of the 'readymade' is its lack of uniqueness. The replica of a 'Readymade' delivering the same message; in fact nearly every one of the 'readymades' existing today is not an original in the conventional sense.⁴²

Distinct from the industrial objects turned readymade used by Duchamp, there is uniqueness to the use of flowers as readymade. No two flowers are the same, and each changes and shifts towards death in different ways. In contrast to this, my use of everyday objects, such as the basketball hoop, or plastic drinking bottle, are manufactured and lack uniqueness. The coupling of these two elements, of the unique and not unique representations of readymade objects creates a relationship between two different types of readymade objects, something that is manufactured and reproducible and something that is natural, bound by time and unique. By presenting the manufactured in conjunction with the natural, my artwork also refers to a history of symbolism and meaning that lies dormant in many still life images.

42 Marcel Duchamp, Michel Sanouillet, and Elmer Peterson, *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp* (New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1989), P142.

Part Two – Symbolism

The still life was a popular working methodology for 16th Century Dutch artists and artisans. The term 'stilleven' first appeared in the northern Netherlands in 1650 and translated meant things lying still, soulless model or inanimate model.⁴³ The term 'vanitas' was used to describe a certain type of still life setting where biblical symbolism was used to describe and remind the viewer of their own mortality. The act of creating a vanitas still life setting was popular in 16th century portraits where the subject would often be holding a skull, or perhaps a more hopeful symbol as the carnation, a floral motif of eternal life.⁴⁴ During this period, paintings of floral bouquets in still life settings became prominent. Reflective of the time and the popularity of the vanitas, a common theme within these paintings was the inclusion of flowers and plants that symbolised death and impermanence. Flowers had been historically included in religious imagery and many flowers presented in these paintings carried specific religious or moral symbolic meaning. Examples such as: the white iris being used as a symbol for the Virgin Mary's purity; the daisy representing charity; and, buttercup signaling an unmarried state told a story or presented to the viewer a moral metaphor. The presence of insects in these paintings highlighted for the viewer the passing of time, and the presentation of flowers from various seasons and at different stages of bloom was a common motif.

Jan Davidsz de Heem was a 16th Century Dutch painter whose contribution to the field of still life painting and specialisation in floral pieces maintained his position as one of the best and most skillful painters of his time.⁴⁵ *Still life with flowers in a glass vase* (1650-83) (Figure 13), presents a myriad of flowers from multiple seasons at different stages of bloom or decay.

43 B. Haak and Elizabeth Willems-Treeman, *The Golden Age : Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), P115.

44 Ibid., P125.

45 Ruud Priem et al., *Dutch Masters from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam* (Melbourne, Sydney: National Gallery of Victoria, 2005), P30.

Alongside this arrangement the viewer can also see caterpillars and tiny ants as well as a butterfly and a bee in the act of pollination. This particular arrangement by De Heem made several symbolic references to Christian ideals. The butterfly resting on the red carnation for instance, was considered a strong symbol for the death and Passion of Christ, whilst the morning glories that only open during daylight represented the light of the truth of Christ. Not all viewers of this painting would have known these meanings, but the artist intended them to represent such themes. Rather than being a record of what the artist saw before him, the bouquet demanded the imagination and decoding of the viewer to gain its full meaning.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ "Painting in the Dutch Golden Age - a Profile of the Seventeenth Century," ed. National Gallery of Art Washington (National Gallery of Art, Washington 2007).



Figure 13. Jan Davidsz de Heem, *Still life with flowers in a glass vase*, 1650-83. Oil on copper. 54.5 x 36.5cm. The Rijksmuseum. Source: <https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/nl/ontdek-de-collectie/overzicht/jan-davidsz-de-heem/objecten#/SK-C-214,0> (Accessed 10th March 2015)

Similarly in *Untitled #4* (2014) (Figure 14 and 15) from the series of work *The World is weary of me and I am weary of it*, I investigated the role of symbolic and personal meaning in the context of my own practice. Using the combination of a collapsible sports bottle and a single sunflower, I used both prescribed and personal symbolic references to present a narrative from my childhood. The language of flowers subscribes the sunflower to the meaning of pride. Growing up on a farm in Macalister, a rural area around 200km west of Toowoomba, this work paid homage to my first

career ambition of being a farmer. As the sunflower sought light from the adjacent window, the stem bent, deformed and changed. Using a collapsible sports bottle as the vase I wanted to further establish the connection to youth, fragility, expectations and change. Figure 15 documents the installation at the end point of the exhibition, the flower devoid of colour, its face slumped and turned to the wall. Through a prescribed and personal symbolic meaning this work aimed to invite the viewer to experience some of the pride and excitement of youth, and the inevitable disappointment of the future.



Figure 14. *Untitled # 4*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Sunflower, collapsible sports bottle. 100 x 30 cm.



Figure 15. *Untitled # 4*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Sunflower, collapsible sports bottle. 100 x 30 cm.

The presentation of my work after the exhibition occurred is of course relegated to the field of photography. The photographic documentation is the lasting impression of this symbolically loaded slow performance.

Part Three – Representation

With a background in photomedia, my desire to explore the dilettante through the lens of the camera was ever present. As time passes the photographic image highlights for the viewer that the photograph, as a representation of likeness, speaks only of what it is unlike. The basic photographic process of light reflecting off an object and onto a photo-sensitive medium forges an essential link between the object and its representation known as the photographic index. In *Notes on the Index – Part 1* (1968), Rosalind Krauss introduces her reader to the idea of the index through the two main identifying components, the signifier and the referent.⁴⁷

As distinct from symbols, indexes establish their meaning along the axis of a physical relationship to their referents. They are the marks or traces of a particular cause, and that cause is the thing to which they refer, the object they signify.⁴⁸

I consider this idea in relation to my work *Untitled #1* from the series *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it* (2014) (Figure 16, 17 & 18). By displaying the image of the original arrangement (Figure 13), next to the arrangement itself as seen in Figure 14, I established for the viewer a photographic index by which they could refer to the decaying arrangement. As the flowers deteriorated over time the physical referent changed, and the photograph spoke only of what it was ‘unlike’. The audience members could refer to the first moment of this slow performance of decay. The relationship that was created between the floral installation and its image was of fundamental importance to the work, establishing a relationship between the photograph and the installation.

⁴⁷ Rosalind E Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986). P196-209
⁴⁸ Ibid. P198



Figure 16. *Untitled # 1*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Ink-jet print on art paper. 20 x 20 cm.



Figure 17 & 18. *Untitled # 1*, 2014, from *The world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, 2014 - ongoing. Ink-jet print on art paper, palm, orchid and round bottom flask. 200 x 200 cm.

Once the flowers died, and the exhibition was over, the photograph became the referent for what had been.⁴⁹ The photograph announced the death of a moment, and the impending death of the arrangement and artwork. The light that touched the subject also wrote the image, and the image hence became a precursor for the future. In this way the photographic image in this work was the antithesis of death, it allowed the subject to live on.

This work also recalls elements of the work by American artist Joseph Kosuth. In Kosuth's work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (Figure 19), three variations of one chair are presented to the viewer; the chair itself; a printed life scale photograph of the chair in-situ; and, a dictionary explanation of a chair. Kosuth was commenting on the relationship between image, object and language. I am interested in the way he combined the photographic image of the chair with the original referent of the chair. In the abovementioned work I have similarly placed an image with its referent except in this case the referent (the arrangement in the gallery) is slowly changing, transforming and decaying.

⁴⁹ The notion of the photograph as something that 'has been' forms the major part of Roland Barthes text *Camera Lucida* (1980).



Figure 19. Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Chairs*, 1965. Wood folding chair, mounted photograph of a chair, and mounted photographic enlargement of the dictionary definition of "chair", Chair. 82 x 37.8 x 53 cm, photographic panel 91.5 x 61.1 cm, text panel 61 x 61.3 cm. Museum of Modern Art. Source: http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/joseph-kosuth-one-and-three-chairs-1965. (Accessed 10th March 2015)

Additionally, my works also link to the traditions of still life as I attempt to imbue everyday objects with personal symbolic meaning. In art historian Meyer Schapiro's *The Still Life as Personal Object*, he explores the relationship between still life and their interpreted and true meaning through the work of Dutch artist Vincent van Gogh.⁵⁰ Focusing on a number of paintings by van Gogh of a pair of shoes (an example can be seen in Figure 20 *A Pair of Shoes* (1886)), Schapiro suggests that through the vehicle of still life the shoes embody great personal meaning.

50 Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art : Style, Artist, and Society, Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1994).

One can describe van Gogh's painting of his shoes as a picture of objects seen and felt by the artist as a significant part of himself - he faces himself like a mirrored image - chosen, isolated, carefully arranged, and addressed to himself.⁵¹

He interprets the work as mirroring van Gogh's lifelong interest in the act of walking, the act of personal pilgrimage, and the shoes as a type of personal symbolism of this act.⁵² Similarly, in my own practice, I choose the objects, flowers and installation through a combination of personal and traditionally referenced symbolism. By photographing and presenting my work through the photographic image I infer another level of indexical symbolism.



Figure 20. Vincent van Gogh, *A Pair of Shoes*, 1886. Oil on canvas. 38.1 cm x 45.3 cm. Van Gogh Museum. Source: <http://www.vangoghmuseum.nl/en/collection/s0011V1962>. (Accessed 10th March 2015)

51 Ibid., P146.

52 Ibid., P147.

Conclusion

This research paper presents historic and contemporary examples of artists who appropriate techniques from other professional fields, thus positioning themselves as amateurs within the field from which they are borrowing. I have explored the potential of employing dilettantism coupled with professional practice as a strategic methodology that enables liberating and constructive outcomes for artistic production.

In *Chapter One – Not Knowing* I examined the work and writing of English artist, composer/musician Brian Eno who has directly engaged in dilettantism throughout his practice. This strategy ensures his artistic interpretation and freedom. In relation this I examine how by using dilettantism in my arts production, coupled with operating a professional arts practice ensures me a similar freedom to explore materials and areas of production that would otherwise fall outside the scope of my arts training. I examine how my own personal anecdotes have been represented through the presentation of floral/object juxtapositions and how these arrangements present a slow performative decay and thus a failure of the work by virtue of the short life span of the material. I relate this part of my practice to that of Sydney based florist Dr Lisa Cooper and the slippery chasm between floral installations and artworks that can sometimes occur in the floristry industry. Drawing on a quote by American artist John Baldessari I have further examined how failure can be used as a strategy and methodology, again, referring this back to my own practice I examine how my own failure as a bisexual is used as both personal methodology and subject throughout my body of work. In part two of this chapter I discuss the practice of French artist Camille Henrot and give a contemporary example of an artist using floristry techniques for an art works. Within this I draw relationships between my practice and Henrot's showing how both express complex ideas through the use of simple materials and forms.

Extending on this idea, I explore the practice and working methodology of American artists Mark Dion, specifically looking at his views on professional dilettantism in reference to the work *Neukom Vivarium* (2006).

In *Chapter Two – Knowing*, I discuss the use of flowers throughout history and in contemporary culture. I use writing by French philosopher Roland Bathes and French theorist Georges Bataille to explore the relationship flowers have within culture. Additionally I explore the ancient Japanese art of flower arranging - Ikebana, where the presentation of a single arrangement is said to present the beauty and essence of life. In particular the work of Japanese Ikebana Master Akane Teshigahara who's focus is on the imbued symbolism present in Ikebana. This is also present in my own work. Moreover I use to the work of Dutch still life painter Jan Davidsz de Heem to examine the symbolic references often used in 16th century Dutch still life painting. This directly relates to my use of the historic language of flowers for both prescribed and personal symbolic meaning. The final section excavates the foundations of my arts practice, photo media, and its enduring influence of the on the mediation of my sculptural arrangements.

Throughout this paper I propose that there are various strengths in embracing dilettantism as a strategy, such as freedom of expression; the provision of an unrestrained research voice; the reinterpretation of tradition without the constraint of traditional rules; the possibility of not knowing and having nothing to lose. It needs to be pointed out that there is also an underlying sense of deception or trickery proposed by the artist as dilettante. Whilst this paper espouses the complexities and many freedoms allowed to the dilettante, there is a dangerous naivety in the professionalisation of such a role. To formalise in this case means to mimic amateurism, which is at obvious odds with professionalisation and comes with a responsibility to acknowledge the awareness of your power to choose to be in such a role. For example, my practice and that of Henrot's, has the potential to be read as cultural appropriation, in this lies the possibility for

misunderstanding and lack of attribution to the origins of the art form, and disrespect for the long history of Ikebana and its spiritually loaded practice. Despite such risks involved in inhabiting the role of the dilettante, it is essential to my practice. This unsteady territory provides substance for exploring what it means to exist in-between polarities; as a person between sexual polarities; and as an artist working within the polarities of dilettantism.

Bibliography

- Aleman, Cecilia. "The Language of Flowers." In *Camille Henrot* edited by Cecilia Alemani, Anna Watkins Fisher, Mathieu Copeland and Galerie Kamel Mennour, 1 vol. (296). Paris: K. Mennour, 2013.
- . "Relations De 'Traduction', Interview with the Artist." *Mousse*, no. 35 (October - November 2012).
- Amundson, Norman, Lauri Mills, and Barbara Smith. "Incorporating Chaos and Paradox into Career Development." *Australian Journal of Career Development* 23, no. 1 (2014): 13-21.
- Barthes, Roland. *How to Live Together : Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces*. European Perspectives. New York: Columbia University Press, 2012.
- Bergson, Henri, Keith Ansell-Pearson, and John ©* Maoilearca. *Key Writings*. Athlone Contemporary European Thinkers. New York: Continuum, 2002.
- Davey, H. E. *The Japanese Way of the Artist*. Michi: Japanese Arts and Ways. New York: Stone Bridge Press, 2012.
- Duchamp, Marcel, Michel Sanouillet, and Elmer Peterson. *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*. New York, N.Y.: Da Capo Press, 1989.
- Eno, Brian. "An Interview with Brian Eno." In *From Brussels With Love: Les Disques Du Crépuscule*, 1980.
- . *Red Bull Music Academy Presents Brian Eno: An Illustrated Talk 2013*. The Great Hall, Cooper Union, New York 2013.
- Exculsive, Art 21. *Mark Dion: Methodology* 2008.
- Fleming, Paul. *Exemplarity and Mediocrity: The Art of the Average from Bourgeois Tragedy to Realism* Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009.
- Fox, Dan. "Known Unknowns." *Frieze*, no. 161 (March 2014).
- Haak, B., and Elizabeth Willems-Treeman. *The Golden Age : Dutch Painters of the Seventeenth Century*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1984.
- Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011.
- Henrot, Camille. "Interview with Camille Henrot for Le Salon." By Maaïke Lauwaert (2014).
- Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1986.
- Le Feuvre, Lisa. *Failure*. Documents of Contemporary Art. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The MIT Press ; Whitechapel Gallery, 2010.
- MacKenzie, Duncan, Richard Holland, and Brian Andrews, eds. *Episode 251: Mark Dion*. Edited by Duncan MacKenzie, Richard Holland and Brian Andrews, Bad at Sports, 2010.

- Marsh, Joanna. "A Conversation with Mark Dion." *American Art* 23, no. 2 (2009): 32-53.
- "Painting in the Dutch Golden Age - a Profile of the Seventeenth Century." edited by National Gallery of Art Washington. National Gallery of Art, Washington 2007.
- Priem, Ruud, Rijksmuseum (Netherlands), National Gallery of Victoria., and Art Exhibitions Australia Limited. *Dutch Masters from the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam*. Melbourne, Sydney: National Gallery of Victoria, 2005.
- Sato, Shozo. *Ikebana: The Art of Arranging Flowers*. Kanagawa: Tuttle Publishing, 2012.
- Schapiro, Meyer. *Theory and Philosophy of Art : Style, Artist, and Society*. Selected Papers. New York: George Braziller, 1994.
- Sherlock, Amy. "Camille Henrot. Les Fleurs Du Mal." *The Plant*, no. 6 (2014): 52 - 64.
- Teshigawara, Akane. "Untilted Arrangment." <http://www.sogetsu.or.jp/e/akane/ikebanaphoto/> 2012.
- Thornton, Sarah. *Seven Days in the Art World*. Norton pbk. ed. New York: W.W. Norton, 2009.
- Wales, Art Gallery of New South. "Collection: Mark Dion " <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/collection/works/323.2008.a-c/>.
- Xenophon, Maurice Ashley Cooper, Edward Spelman, William Smith, Sarah Fielding, James Welwood, Richard Graves, *et al.* *The Whole Works of Xenophon : Complete in One Volume*. London: Jones & co., 1832.

Catalogue of work presented for examination

1. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 22* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Neon light, phalaenopsis orchid, 38cm x 45cm.
2. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 23* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Glass sheets, palm, 1.2m x 1m.
3. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 24* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Basketball hoop, wattle, red hot poker, 1m x 1m.
4. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 25* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Finger bowl, kangaroo paw, garden wire, 80cm x 1m.



1. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 22* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Neon light, phalaenopsis orchid, 38cm x 45cm.



2. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 23* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Glass sheets, palm, 1.2m x 1m.



3. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 24* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Basketball hoop, wattle, red hot poker, 1m x 1m.



4. Anna McMahon, *Untitled # 25* from the series *the world is weary of me and I am weary of it*, Finger bowl, kangaroo paw, garden wire, 80cm x 1m.