



# The Parallaxis

## a game of walking between worlds

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy

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# author's note

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# declaration

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# abstract

The Parallax is an exploration of resonance and possibility within the landscape of the everyday. It is an experiment in calibrating our senses to more subtle frequencies; a quest for cracks and shadows that transform the known into the unknown. Ultimately it is a conversation with the places that we are continuously creating — and that are continuously creating us.

The phenomenon of parallax provides depth and dimensionality to our binocular vision by requiring us to synthesise two different lines of sight. The word is derived from the Greek *parallaxis*, meaning "to change" — and deeper within its etymological roots we find *allos*, other. Word magic. With parallax we can locate ourselves when we are lost at sea, by measuring the distance between our horizon and the brightest of celestial bodies. Star magic.

The Parallax is likewise a triangulation; an inductive journey toward a point of synthesis. It is a process, a practice, a proposition (Jones 2009). Situated at the crossroads of art and human geography, it contributes to both disciplines an articulation of knowledge that is unstable and ambiguous (Smith & Dean 2009). The assertion of a multivalent epistemology has become central to creative practice research, and in recent years has also begun to influence thinking in the field of human geography (Thrift 2008). It is an orientation toward knowledge that has much to offer within the academy and beyond, suggesting as it does 'a performative technology for adaptive living' (Vannini 2015, p. 4) and 'a way to come to understand the world that does not simultaneously set the stage for limited use of that knowledge' (Langer & Piper 1987, p. 280). The Parallax uses the methodology of creative practice research to enact a speculative epistemology of place, through the realisation of a creative work and this accompanying text.

*The city is so visible that it is invisible; a persistent substrate patterning our days. We see it no more than we imagine it to see us.*

*But what if this city is not the only one in which we dwell? What if there is another, more elusive city inhabiting the same streets? A city waiting to be found; a story waiting to be written. Would you step sideways into this subtle city, if suddenly a door cracked open?*

*What if, what if.* These were my initial research questions. Collectively they form an orbit around a central preoccupation, which has remained constant even as the questions ask new questions (and they continue still). The preoccupation is this: the traversal of the liminal. The bridge between *what is* and *what if* (Stevens 2013). The transformative potential of the unknown, and the unknowable. The curious dualism of *magic* and *real*.

I began this project with the intent to design a game, but the game itself was never meant to be the object of research. In fact it was supposed to be invisible. I wanted to facilitate ambiguous urban encounters that were unfettered by any contextual frame; that erased the so-called 'magic circle' (Huizinga 1955) that structures our behaviour when we engage in activities designated as play. In short: I wanted to make a game that was real, which could evoke a magic that was equally real. My previous research had led me to believe that ambiguity itself is an alchemical agent, able to locate doors where none seem readily apparent. Could I build on previous studies (Gaver, Beaver & Benford 2003; Langer & Piper 1987) and reach a greater understanding of this alchemy?

This game was meant to be so many things that it did not turn out to be. And yet it turned out to be so many things that it was meant to be. For while I had intended to locate doors for others to step through, it was my own traversal of the liminal that would unfold. The making of the game became the game, and thus enacted itself as

performative research. Here 'the symbolic data ... not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself' (Haseman 2006, p. 6). It is a methodology that is native to creative practice, and more recently has been adopted in the field of human geography (Dewsbury 2010, Dirksmeier 2008).

I understood the performativity of this project long before I came to see its more interesting implication: To make a game that's real, meant to invoke a magic that is also real, it is necessary to play for real. The researcher must become the researched, willing to undergo change and reflect upon this process. My methodology, then, is not only performative but also reflexive (Etherington 2004, Myers 2010), and my contribution to the fields of creative practice research and human geography is a detailed case study of this methodology. For the game is communicated equally by the creative work that is presented beyond the boundaries of this document, and by the narrative of its becoming as manifested here. The two outputs use differing methods but share the same methodology. In this sense the dissertation is both map and territory, charting a traversal even as that charting influences its course.

The journey of this game has been the process of learning how to respond creatively to the unstable and the uncertain. In traversing this terrain I have drawn on a breadth of sources both critical and creative, in particular the psychoanalyst DW Winnicott, the philosopher David Abram, the artist John Cage, and the philosophy of Zen Buddhism. The commonality across my methods has been the movement toward a distinct perceptual state, which can be described as non-representational (Dewsbury 2010; Vannini 2015) or in the Zen tradition as *satori* (Suzuki 1956). In this state 'felt meaning emerges from the medium in the form of potential semblances that are "sensed," polysemic and open-ended and so unpredictable and novel' (Hunt 1995, p. 42).

Grounded in a phenomenology of urban walking, *The Parallaxis* uses photography, site-specific installation and creative nonfiction to access this perceptual shift. As the game unfolds it moves first through the idea of imaginative play as a subjective experience (Winnicott 1965), and then beyond this interior landscape to an intersubjective rapport with the city. Here it calls on Abram's (1997) 'ecology of magic' to propose a material realm that is animate, and in which, '[p]rior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists' (ibid. p. 57).

'Art and real magic know subtler paths still,' writes the anthropologist Michael Taussig (2014, p. 29) 'What if ... there never was a mechanical universe with dead objects on one side and lively humans on another? What if that picture of reality is stupendously false and silly, yet we adhere to it same way as people — so we are told — once thought the Earth was flat?'

*What if, what if?*



# foreword

The format of this dissertation requires a few words of introduction, both in regard to concept and to technical conventions.

To begin with the conceptual: this is a performative document. It has evolved in tandem with the aspects of the project that are presented elsewhere (a gallery show and a [website](#)), those other artefacts ostensibly serving as the creative work. To me this distinction is artificial, a dualism belied by the reflexive and reflective methods that unify these two expressions of The Parallaxis. The writing has been a part of the practice; the practice has been a part of the writing.

The contemporary Australian artist Lesley Duxbury writes of breaking down this barrier in creative practice research, noting that such a breach allows the practitioner to share something of the 'context of production' (2011, p. 41) that is essential to gaining insight from an artwork-as-research. She argues that 'if an exegetical text is developed in and through the art project as a working project in itself, where all aspects of the project reflect in and off each other not as a retrospectively produced text, it may come closer to [this] intention' (ibid.).

The narrative that I present here is chronological, and draws on autoethnographic methods (Ellis & Bochner 2000) to convey a researcher's journey through the unfolding of a project. In constructing this dissertation I have initiated the only deliberate "doubling" in The Parallaxis, which has manifested several other parallaxic doublings of its own accord. This specific doubling is that of a braided narrative, which acknowledges the reciprocal relationship between practice and theory in a research project. The braiding is implemented as a central text punctuated by additional commentary; when a black

triangle appears in the main text, click on it to reveal this secondary discourse (and click again to collapse it). ▲

▼ Smith and Dean (2009, p. 8) have written at length about the relationship between theory and practice, incorporating what they refer to as 'practice-led research and research-led practice' into an 'iterative cyclic web' model. 'This model combines the cycle (alternations between practice and research), the web (numerous points of entry, exit, cross-referencing and cross-transit within the practice-research cycle), and iteration (many sub-cycles in which creative practice or research processes are repeated with variation)' (ibid.).

The authors further note that the reciprocity between practice and research has taken many different forms in their own collaborative work. These forms include 'symbiosis between research and creative practice in which each feeds on the other; hybridisation of the many discourses surrounding them; transference of the characteristics of research onto practice and vice versa; and alternations between research and creative practice, often within a single project' (ibid. p. 11).

My original intent was to use the primary text exclusively for the narrative of practice and the secondary text for theory, and to maintain a strict chronological correlation between the two. I would only introduce a theoretical component if I had already encountered it at that point in the project, and I would indicate the extent to which I was aware of its influence. Over time these references would begin to knit themselves together, into the framework of theory and practice that I was traveling toward.

This proved to be a slippery proposition on both accounts. First came the issue of keeping practice and theory in their designated places. While editing an advanced draft of

this dissertation I realised that long passages of theoretical discussion had made their way into the "white space" of the central narrative, and brief reflections on practice had occasionally crept into the shadow text. Confronted with the bleak prospect of having to restructure the entire dissertation, I went through the document and made detailed notes about these textual slippages.

To my relief I discovered that the experiment had not been a failure — or at least not entirely, I hope. Rather, my evolving methods had transgressed boundaries that had felt like natural contours when I first began the project. Three years on I could now detect a patterning of method: following Smith and Dean's 'iterative cyclic web' model, I was cycling between practice-led research and research-led practice. When the weather was warm and amenable to walking, practice led. In winter, theoretical research typically dominated. And without fail, the central narrative was slipping into theory each time winter rolled around. With this understanding in mind I have allowed the slippages to remain. They adhere to my original intent, which was to tell the story of this project's unfolding as it happened. In winter I immersed myself in theory, and the dissertation moves to this seasonal rhythm.

This brings me to my second constraint, that of maintaining a strict chronology of theory, which has proven far more difficult to negotiate. In fact on this account I would say that I have failed; or have found the approach to be incompatible with the job description set out for the dissertation; or both. Perhaps this is too critical, for in fact most of the shadow text keeps pace with the main narrative — and where it breaks with linearity I have made note of the departure. Objectively I would remark that this aspect of the project remains unresolved, perhaps to be revisited as a research question in its own right.

Media studies scholar Peter Zhang speaks of yin texts, such as the *I Ching*, which in their 'discontinuity, resonance, uncertainty, indeterminacy, and undecidability' (2014, p. 454)

require 'maximum participation on the part of the reader' (ibid. p. 455). Duxbury notes similarly that 'although it will not be an easy thing to do, the challenge for artist-researchers is to produce texts, which allow for multiple readings or ambiguity in order to engage the imagination' (2011, p. 42).

Both the yin and the yang of this narrative contain ruptures, repetitions, ambiguities and allusions that have been left for the reader to enact. The images throughout, which are all original works that I have produced as part of this research project, have likewise been offered not as 'mere illustration to support the text' (Sousanis 2015, p. 54) but in recognition of 'what can be made visible when we work in a form that is not only *about*, but *is* also the thing itself' (ibid. p. 59). As such, no table of figures has been provided.

# other wor(l)ds

For these ports I could not draw a route on the map or set a date for the landing.

At times all I need is a brief glimpse, an opening in the midst of an incongruous landscape, a glint of light in the fog, the dialogue of two passersby meeting in the crowd, and I think that, setting out from there, I will put together, piece by piece, the perfect city, made of fragments mixed with the rest, of instants separated by intervals, of signals one sends out, not knowing who receives them. If I tell you that the city toward which my journey tends is discontinuous in space and time, now scattered, now more condensed, you must not believe the search for it can stop. Perhaps while we speak, it is rising, scattered, within the confines of your empire; you can hunt for it, but only in the way I have said.

— Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities* (1972, p. 164)

I think this whole question of art is one of changing our minds and that the function of the artist is not self-expression but self-alteration.

— John Cage, 1970 (Dickinson 2014, p. 198)

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part zero





## a city waiting to be found

When I was 13 years old I discovered that my leafy suburban hometown harboured a place called Hidden City. Riding my bike toward the outskirts of town one summer day, I noticed a dirt track leading off from the main road into the dense woods beyond. So I did what any 13-year-old with a brand new mountain bike would do: I steered into the woods.

It was a perfect path for mountain biking, pitching and dipping with the natural contours of the land, taking in boulders and gnarled old tree roots as it wended its way through the sun-dappled forest. It was not a perfect path for the suburban sedans of the 1980s. And yet as I pedalled deeper into the woods, there came the glint of something strange. A chrome bumper. Then, a bedroom window. Cars. Houses.

The late August light filtered down through the canopy, golden green. Insects buzzed, birds chirped; the main road was unheard, unseen. Just the quiet rustling of this wooded world, and ... splashing in a backyard pool? Laughter, somewhere. The wafting scent of barbeque.

In 1988 my hometown was still full of forest. Maples, oaks, elms, birches; creeks and bogs and thorny brambles. I knew these woods. All those faint trails left by generations past, and the wilder places where there were no paths. Yet here was this mysterious enclave that I had somehow missed, less than a mile from my own house. An entire neighbourhood, 50 acres large.

I look back now and I can see why I was so transfixed by Hidden City (also known as Secret City or the Old City, as my later research would reveal). It was a place between places; an unexpected pocket of strangeness; a rent in the fabric of the everyday. This was the kind of magic that I found enchanting. Since childhood my favourite novels had

always walked a fine line between fantasy and realism, limning our world with the idea that it was already something more. Creating spaces where possibility was on equal footing with plausible deniability. But those were fictions, and finished ones at that. This was real, and here, and now. The solid earth, the soaring sky, the twigs snapping beneath my wheels. Ancient boulders velvety with lush green moss. A breeze, a shift of light: the glint of whirling bicycle spokes.

Objectively, Hidden City was just some houses in the woods. Subjectively of course it was much more. It became a fable in my personal mythology; an emblem of the wonder that was enfolded in the everyday. It was a tale of neighbourhoods, of shadows and sunlight, and of the things that can be found when you steer into the woods.

## a story waiting to be written

If an occupation is something that we choose, a preoccupation seems to be something that chooses us. Adulthood took me to new neighbourhoods, where I would write new fables. Love, loss, longing, uncertainty — a life no more or less extraordinary than the next. And for a long time I forgot about those houses in the woods. But eventually I found myself grappling with a story that seemed impossible to write. It was too big, too painful, too much of a conclusion despite the new beginning that it implied. In search of something that I couldn't name, I found my way back out into the neighbourhood. For hours and hours, I would walk. As I settled into the solace of this routine, strange things began to catch my eye. Messages, they almost seemed. I started photographing them. And while my painful story still needed to be written, these walks enlarged from solace into something larger and more luminous.

Meanwhile, I was writing other stories. As a journalist, and in my spare time as a frustrated novelist. Truth be told, the journalism was frustrating too. Neither fact nor fiction seemed able to invoke what I was after; what I had always been after: possibility. Because of course the job of journalism is to report on what is known; to dispel ambiguities rather than create them. And fiction demarcates itself from possibility by its very definition, regardless of how many truths it may be enlisted to tell. Once upon a time: not this time; not here, not now, not you. ▲

▼ While editing a nearly-final draft of this dissertation it occurred to me that my interest in the instability of knowledge can be traced back to my experience as a journalist. During my years as a reporter I found myself repeatedly confronted with this instability, and with my collusion in obscuring its reality. I came to see, with discomfited clarity, how the narratives that we rely upon to understand the world are

nearly always the sum of facts and explanations provided by subject matter experts. But the knowledge constructed by these experts remains impenetrable and irrefutable unless we share their particular expertise, for as philosopher and game designer Chris Bateman proposes, every fact is 'derived by a practice, or a collection of practices' (2016, pp. 8–9). Bateman offers geological and historical examples (the height of a mountain; the history of a city); likewise, I can think of stories that I wrote about vaccines, pesticides and labour laws (to name just a few) which forced me to acknowledge the limits of my reporting. For as Bateman notes: 'It is these practices that have the authentic claim to knowledge — knowing "the facts" without the practices that underlie them is only trusting that you are connected by a chain of reliable witnesses to those who do possess the relevant skills. Furthermore, the extent to which we truly share in the knowledge being conveyed in such a way will always be limited by the extent we understand the relevant practices' (ibid. p. 9).

When I eventually left the field of journalism I did so shaken by this understanding, and frustrated by the uncritical approach to knowledge held by most consumers of mass media — myself included, when I failed to recall this newsroom lesson in epistemology. Perhaps Bateman's words should be appended to every news report: 'If the world is understood solely as the totality of facts, we will miss the more important point that *being in the world* involves far more than mere facts, which are merely the residue of the skills that provided them' (ibid.).

I was seeking a third way. Eventually I caught a glimpse of what it might look like, in the emerging phenomenon of the Alternate Reality Game. Now an established entertainment genre, the ARG is an interactive narrative that is delivered in a deliberately fragmented fashion through multiple media platforms and material interactions. As I wrote when I first discovered the form, the ARG was 'a game that lived by the tagline "This is not a game,"

relying on real-time role playing, storytelling, cipher-cracking, and the collective arcane knowledge of its players; that didn't necessarily begin online, and didn't necessarily end there' (Kilby 2002, para. 7). In other words: here, and now, and you.

But also clearly fiction, despite occasional moments of delicious ambiguity. As games journalist Michael Andersen notes, "This is not a game" was always a conceit; a frame. 'Although a literal reading of the mantra denies this central truth,' he writes, 'alternate reality games are still games. They merely ask players to extend their suspension of disbelief across media, in exchange for a more engrossing narrative' (2012, para. 14).

This art of immersion was intriguing nonetheless, and I continued to follow its evolution across various related forms. I became particularly interested in experiences that existed predominantly or entirely offline, in contrast to the web-centric ARG ▲. Eventually this interest would lead me away from journalism and into a masters program in media art, where I began to forge my own third way.

▼ Media art in the early 2000s was transformed by the rise of ubiquitous computing and the possibilities offered by this pervasive connectivity. As games scholar Sebastian Deterding notes: 'Intertwined with both the serious games movement and artistic play practices, new forms of gaming evolved in the early 2000s that extended games into new contexts and spaces' (2014, p. 31). These new forms expanded the magic circle of play 'spatially, temporally, or socially' (Montola 2009, p. 12), and collectively become known as pervasive games (Deterding 2014).

At the forefront of this movement was (and arguably still is) the UK-based artist collective Blast Theory, which has been producing works since the late 1990s that are 'less about winning games than layering alternative meanings and narratives into

participants' experience of moving through cities or staged environments' (ibid.).

I discovered Blast Theory in 2006 through my participation on a media arts listserv whose members were discussing the burgeoning hybridity of the field. A mention on the mailing list led to an article by media theorist and producer Matt Locke, in which he offers an enticing summary of his experience with Blast Theory's *Uncle Roy All Around You* (2003):

'I'm standing in a red phone booth on the lower half of Regent St, London. Outside, a drunk-looking man in a tweed suit looks desperate to make a phone call, whilst I'm standing here, holding a PDA, waiting for the phone to ring. After what seems like an age, the call comes, and a man's voice tells me that I have to trust him, and that he has something he has to ask me to do for him. After he finishes the call, I've got to head north, take the first left turn, and get into the white limousine that's parked by the side of the road. I wait in the limousine for about 5 minutes, then a man in a brown suit gets in and sits next to me. Without saying a word, the limousine drives off, and the man starts asking me questions, looking straight ahead all the time. Have I ever had to trust a stranger? Would I be able to help someone I've never met if they were in need? Could I be at the end of the phone whenever they needed to call me? Could I commit to that for a year? (Locke 2003, para. 3).

Inspired by this first glimpse of immersive, mixed reality theatre I went on to read everything I could locate about Blast Theory's work. The artists became a touchstone in my own fledgling creative practice, and in fact a year later I would interview to be their assistant. What interested me about Blast Theory's oeuvre was not the innovative use of technology, but how the work went beyond just performance and play, nudging participants out of the arena of art and into the void of edgy, unlabelled

experience. Blast Theory is good at ambiguity.

Locke's article also introduced me to relational aesthetics, a term coined by French art critic Nicolas Bourriaud in an attempt to characterise 'a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space' (Bourriaud 1998, p. 113). The majority of Blast Theory's work could be said to fall under this rubric, as could another formative project that I was soon to encounter.

## the riddle in the middle

In my journey from observing to creating there was a crucial intermediary phase: participating. Not in an ARG — they were, in the end, too fictional for my liking. They were also too mechanical: giant jigsaw puzzles made of pieces that the players earned by solving other puzzles. The ARG was a world of clicks rather than whispers; solutions rather than suggestions. And there was always a progression toward a finite end. The teaser clues that led players into newly launching ARGs came to be called rabbit holes, but I've always thought of them more as yellow brick roads.

One day though I stumbled down a rabbit hole into a world that seemed to be made entirely of whispers. My involvement with this world; with this project that wrapped itself in one veil after another, would ultimately span several years and several continents, and influenced me greatly in my quest to make a game that walked between two worlds.

There is no straightforward way to describe Neurocam. Outwardly it had all of the appearances of an ARG, and was frequently mistaken for one — even by some of its participants. But in reality it was everything an ARG was not (for better and for worse). Launched into the world via one simple, cryptic billboard looming over inner city Melbourne traffic, Neurocam steadfastly refused to identify itself as art, game, cult, marketing campaign, or any of the other things that observers speculated it might be. Essentially it was a shell; a mysterious entity that recruited "operatives" for odd assignments that never seemed to track toward any larger goal. There was no overarching fiction, no game world, no puzzle to be solved.

And yet a community accreted around this strange seed, and then stories, which gradually became a story — the story of what Neurocam actually was. Lived experience of the project melded with speculation about its meaning, until finally there was no distinction between the two. The operatives become Neurocam, and Neurocam became



its operatives. Creator Robin Hely, who publicly denied any involvement with the project until years after its conclusion, acknowledges this intent: Neurocam was 'an attempt to construct spontaneous, evolving narratives where the participants are a key component of the work itself' (Hely 2013, p. 5).

Hely has referred to himself as a 'reality artist' (2013, p. 174), and his oeuvre reveals a consistent method for working with this medium: uncompromising ambiguity. Whether secretly recording his own atrocious behaviour on a blind date (Hely 2002) or earnestly presenting himself as a New Age healer (Hely 2010), the question always lingers: is this real? Neurocam amplified this methodology by withholding the contextualising frame of an artist presenting an artwork, which created a much deeper experience of uncertainty for those who were most actively involved. Occasionally a veil would drop and some sort of truth would seem to be revealed, but behind one veil there always seemed to be another.

That is, until there wasn't. Neurocam had started as a Melbourne-based operation, but unexpected publicity (Moncrief 2004, AnnaRat 2004) led to an explosion of interest internationally. Early operations in Melbourne were a study in relational aesthetics (Bourriaud 1998): participants were brought face to face (or mask to mask, as per the prevailing aesthetic of the project) — in a dimly lit bar, at a bustling train station, under a towering concrete overpass. To silently play chess; to exchange locked briefcases bearing unknown contents; to retrieve a hidden object. Overseas operatives, understandably, did not have the same experience. Initial assignments attempted to evoke the thrill and mystique of these real-world interactions: tail a random stranger for half an hour without being noticed; eavesdrop on a conversation and record the details as accurately as possible; plant a message in a library book. But eventually the assignments turned administrative: Neurocam's primary mechanism for coping with its bloat of international participants was to "promote" them into management. Operatives were

assigned the very aliases that they had previously encountered as Neurocam "executives" — the collection of personas that formed the super-structure of the project.

For a while participants accepted this enfolding, and assumed that it was yet another veil. The project persevered. But it also underwent a fundamental change, which in hindsight can be identified as a crucial point of failure. (Or at least, a point at which many of the early operatives began to lose interest and walk away.) Only now, a decade later, have I come to fully understand this change. Not just the *what* and the *how*, but the *why*.

Promoting operatives into management changed who we were talking to, both literally and symbolically. Neurocam had always traded on its ambiguity: by refusing to be one thing, it could be anything — or even nothing — and claim no culpability. For most of the time that the project was active, its associated website featured a long list of all the things that Neurocam was not. 'Neurocam is not a pyramid marketing scam. Neurocam is not a cult religion. Neurocam is not a psychology experiment. Neurocam is not a terrorist training organisation' (Moncrief 2004, para. 6). And yet amidst all of this equivocation, one certainty was offered: 'Neurocam is an unveiling' (ibid. para. 42).

An unveiling implies an unknown; an unknown implies an Other; an Other implies possibility. The possibility of acknowledgement, invitation, communication. A spark of electricity between poles. This was the frisson that fuelled Neurocam.

The administrative turn removed the second pole — there was no longer an unknown. No Other but ourselves, swimming warily around each other in disguise. Inevitably fictions began to rise, attempting to resurrect the missing pole. But the Other cannot be invented; this is what at long last I have come to understand. For something that is invented is inherently contrived, and therefore known.

Of course Neurocam was artifice from the beginning; a sly meta-fiction about the constructed nature of reality. But before its final veil was dropped to reveal a hall of mirrors, the artificial Otherness of Neurocam was still ambiguous enough to evoke a transformative uncertainty. By instigating situations that transgressed the bounds of everyday experience, the project allowed participants to experience an Other in themselves.

For my part I found that this expansion of awareness persisted beyond activities related specifically to Neurocam, altering not only my perceptions but my relationship to the prosaic world of daily life. The encounter with my own Other seemed to attune me more readily to the presence of other Others, making audible their whispers and inviting a reply. The effect of this expansion was extraordinary: for the first time, I could see beyond the fictions of my own life. Possibilities abounded.

This was the genesis of my creative practice, and I have continued how I began. I remain preoccupied with the traversal of the liminal. After several smaller projects that experimented with and in this intermediary space, The Parallaxis has been my quest to truly understand the mechanisms of its magic.

Perhaps perversely, I set out to do this with a game. . ▲

▼ The first draft of this section included a comparison between the unravelling of Neurocam and the enduring tendency of critics to search for meaning in the enigmatic works of Marcel Duchamp. At the time my understanding of Neurocam's collapse was based not on the idea of an absented Other, but on the notion of a mystery that had been mistaken for a puzzle. This mistake went beyond the casual misreading of Neurocam as an ARG, to a much deeper need amongst participants for

a template to both guide and justify our actions. In this sense it was not really a mistake, but rather an unconscious behaviour in response to intolerable uncertainty. We turned the unknown into a game, and thereby made it safe.

As the second draft came into focus, it seemed to supersede the first. I prepared to eliminate the passage on Duchamp. But on rereading it before discarding I found that it still resonated, not only with my Neurocam experience but with the themes that have manifested through The Parallaxis.

'We drag Duchamp's work out of the darkness of nonmeaning into the light of familiar ground,' writes art historian Gavin Parkinson, 'because in its magnetic strangeness it resembles nothing we have seen before, and that is disquieting' (2011, p. 36).

Parkinson writes at length about the tendency of critics to approach Duchamp's inscrutable oeuvre as a threat to the rational mind, treating it as a code to be cracked despite Duchamp's own 'endlessly quoted Wittgensteinian statement "There is no solution because there is no problem"' (ibid. p. 39).

He continues: 'Duchamp's assent to missing links of various kinds — vagueness, lack, irresolution; blind spots, absences, secrets — intrigues his readers versed in traditional and orthodox techniques of interpretation and explication; intrigues in the fullest sense of that word: intricating, entangling, trapping. Far from encouraging scholars to observe and comment on its *disconnectedness*, the heterogeneity and obscurity of his oeuvre act as a cue for rampant *connectivity*' (ibid.).

Parkinson argues that this drive toward connectivity misunderstands the nature of Duchamp's 'indeterminism, uncertainty, and undecidability', which are not problems to

be solved but rather 'manifestations of his practice to be observed' (ibid. p. 37).

'In this light, secrecy is the *purloined letter* of his work, directing our attention not to what is supposedly behind, hidden, or secret, but to that which has disappeared because it is on show; not to what is purportedly concealed, but to the act of concealment; not to what the work means, but to what it does (how it suggests meanings)' (ibid.).

While Neurocam participants varied in their approach to the experience, an urge toward "rampant connectivity" most certainly prevailed. Whether postulating theories about the true nature of the project, attempting to unearth clues in website metadata, or trying to decode secret messages that bore no message, we worked tirelessly to dispel the very shadows that gave us cover; made us Other. I don't think we even realised that we were doing this.

And *mea culpa*: I was the worst. I never played an ARG, but oh how I played Neurocam. I played it like an investigative journalist, which appeared to be the only game that I knew how to play. Rational, deductive, constructive. More comfortable with the scaffolds of design than the free-fall of discovery.

*Not what the work means, but what it does.* The shadowy mechanics of its magic — which will do what shadows do, when thrust into the light.

If Neurocam showed me how I played, The Parallaxis would teach me how to play differently.

part one



## how to begin



As is the case with many researchers at the beginning of a project, I knew (or thought I knew) the *what* and *why*, and hoped to figure out the *how*. How to make a game that was as ambiguous as *Neurocam*; that likewise was not actually a game, but instead an invitation to alchemical, uncertain play? And the crucial point of difference: how to make it real? A game that could actually deliver an unveiling — was this possible?

For the first few months I struggled to imagine the details that would bring this game to life. (And then I struggled to imagine the ethics application that would accompany it.) Meanwhile I was also trying to locate myself within the landscape of creative practice research. As it turned out, the two challenges were intertwined.

Gradually, through seminars and lectures designed to orient new students to the realm of practice-based research, I began to get my bearings. And as I listened to experienced

practitioners talk about their processes, I started to see my problem: I was using the wrong methodology. My original project proposal was influenced by the work that I had done during my MA in Creative Technology, and was essentially (though not intentionally) a human-computer interaction (HCI) project. I planned to make enigmatic, networked objects that engaged participants in open-ended ways, and to embed these artefacts within the game. By the time I formally commenced my PhD I had discerned that my efforts to develop these objects would dominate the project, and I abandoned my intention to include them in the game. But I did not abandon the idea of the project as design rather than art. Or perhaps more accurately, I did not critically reflect upon the differences between the two. ▲

▼ The key question implied by these differences is of course that of purpose. Here the media art landscape of the previous two decades is instructive. While artists like Blast Theory have used available technologies to critically engage with a variety of sociopolitical issues, ubiquitous computing labs have created novel forms of gaming as a means to prototype these same technologies (Deterding 2014). The distinction between art and design has not been absolute, as evidenced by Blast Theory's longstanding collaboration with the Mixed Reality Lab at the University of Nottingham. But each party to such collaborations has a distinct agenda, as is clearly demonstrated in the first research paper jointly produced by Blast Theory and the Mixed Reality Lab:

'Artistically, the project aims to articulate the spaces between mundane realities (such as traveling on a bus or train) and fantastical projections (most commonly derived from film and television) of drama and action, in which the city is inscribed with untold possibilities. Technically, the project aims to create new mobile mixed reality interfaces that are able to support rich and dynamic interaction between physical and virtual



worlds, both indoors and outdoors, on the scale of a physical city' (Benford et al. 1999, p.1).

The scholars Jillian Hamilton and Luke Jaaniste propose that the differing research aims of art and design can be plotted on a spectrum that ranges from evocative to effective, with implications for methodology as well as methods.

'In evocative research ... the research arises in and through the materiality and advent of the practice,' the authors write. 'It is through an ongoing dialogue between practice, theory and topic that the research question begins to make itself clear, and the shape of the research project resolves itself. The research question may therefore remain open-ended for some time and resist reduction to a single, specific problem. It is such an open-ended approach that allows the practice and artefact to remain irreducible in its meaning' (Hamilton & Jaaniste 2009, p. 6).

'In effective, problem-based projects,' on the other hand, 'the making practices do not tend to lead the research. Instead, the practical, or production aspects of the project begin after the researcher has established a contextual framework. This not only involves establishing the research question, but determining what is needed in the situation or context ... It also involves developing a set of guiding principles and processes for the practice. Only when this (substantial) contextual research and planning has been conducted is the practice initiated to form part of the solution, or an instantiation of an answer' (ibid.).

*Irreducible in its meaning ... An instantiation of an answer.* The relationship between these two research results became clear to me in a question posed by my not-yet supervisor Lyndal Jones, querying this very point. 'Are you writing a poem?' she

asked us, a room full of novice researchers. 'Or are you building a chair?'

Not a chair, I realised in that moment. Not a chair.

I began my PhD under the auspices of RMIT's Games and Experimental Entertainment Lab, which seemed a natural continuation of my masters work. But the lab was unequivocally aligned with the deductive methodologies of design, and as I discovered, was quite hostile to the notion of artistic, evocative research. This tension was instructive: after several stressful months of trying to conform; of trying to create schemas and plans for how I would come to understand the ambiguous city, I realised that I didn't actually want to do design. I wanted this project to unfold. I wanted to work intuitively, organically — a return to the true nature of my creative practice.

Or at least I thought it was the true nature. I left the lab and struck out on my own, but quickly discovered that in fact I had no idea how to do intuitive research. It was a daunting proposition, to close the sketchbook and step into the unknown. To dwell in shadows rather than dispel them. I quite literally did not know how to begin. ▲

▼ In time I would recognise this lack of knowing not as an obstacle but as a condition of a certain way of working, which can be identified by a variety of terms. It is described by Hamilton and Jaaniste (2009) as evocative; by Australian contemporary artist Lyndal Jones (2009) as propositional; by the artist-researchers Hazel Smith and Roger Dean (2009) as process-driven; and by scholars in the field of human geography as non-representational (Lorimer 2005).

This way of working 'is based on the embrace of a mystery outcome,' Jones writes, 'beginning as it does with only the starting point and requiring ongoing responsive development as a result of acute attention to the contextual stimuli. By not judging and only by continuing to the next point — one that is informed by context, learning and chance occurrences — does development occur' (ibid. p. 79).

Artworks that arise from working with this method should not be taken as statements, says Jones, but instead as propositions. 'One or a number may coalesce to create a new perception, one that is at every stage irreducible. Propositions eschew analysis, the binary oppositions of form and content, mind and body and the illustration of intention' (ibid. p. 77).

Both the evocative and the propositional are driven by an interest in process rather than an intent to reach a specific goal. 'To be process-driven is to have no particular starting point in mind and no pre-conceived end,' write Smith and Dean (2009, p. 23). 'Such an approach can be directed towards emergence, that is the generation of ideas which were unforeseen at the beginning of the project. To be goal-orientated is to have start and end points — usually consisting of an initial plan and a clear idea of an ultimate objective or target outcome.'

As Jones suggests, propositions 'are particularly relevant as a means to present art and to have it understood as research' (2009, p. 77). It can be argued that this relevance extends beyond the arts, finding its way into the field of human geography through what itself can be best described as a proposition: non-representational theory.

'Non-representational theory concerns itself with practice, action, and performance,'

writes the ethnographer Phillip Vannini (2015, p. 4). 'Non-representational theorists are weary of the structuralist heritage of the social sciences and suspicious of all attempts to uncover symbolic meaning where other, more practical forms of meaning or even no meaning at all exist.'

In non-representational theory, '[t]he focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. Attention to these kinds of expression, it is contended, offers an escape from the established academic habit of striving to uncover meanings and values that apparently await our discovery, interpretation, judgement and ultimate representation. In short, so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become' (Lorimer 2005, p. 84).

In both the non-representational and the propositional there is an emphasis on the unknown, and also an attention to motion. 'Life is movement — geographic and existential kinesis' writes Vannini (2015, p. 3). 'What is being spoken, then, is a sequence of actions,' writes Jones, adding: 'While one might imagine that training in the visual arts centrally involves developing visual acuity, the contention here is that the sense most highly developed in the strongest visual artists is, in fact, the kinaesthetic sense — the ability to develop images that arise from actions; actions that both artists and viewers respond to with empathy' (2009, p. 80).

Although I hardly knew that I was beginning, my first unknowing steps into this project would involve movement in the most literal sense.

After several false starts I surrendered for a while. Summer had quietly become autumn; my marriage was coming to an end. I'd signed a six-month lease on a doomed old house in an unfamiliar suburb, and I had done all of the unpacking that I planned to do. I started walking. As far as my legs would carry me, in every possible direction. For my health, for my sanity, to fill the empty hours. I took my camera with me. Not to make pretty pictures, but to make a record. And as I poured these images into the reflecting pool of photos that I had taken across the years, I began to see the ripples. Back through Melbourne, Manchester, Portland. Through all of the uncertain times, the disorienting transitions, there was a silvery thread. I started to understand what I was doing. When I needed space, perspective, grounding — when I needed to be held fast and there was no one there but me — I walked. And I documented. Strange and beautiful things that caught my eye; moments when meaning sparked and only I was there to witness. To participate. To create. Moments when something held me; when I was not alone. ▲

That's how I spent the first six months of my PhD, when I couldn't figure out how to make a game that was real.

▼ Psychologist Joanne Duma expresses similar thoughts about her own wandering photography practice, which I was pleasantly surprised to discover after coming to my own intuitive grasping of these ideas.

'With no audience in mind, I sought only direct contact with the image,' she writes. 'I found myself in a space where time lost all meaning, where the ordinary became wondrous ... By being mindfully aware, I was more present to the image as well as to what was to be found inside my experience of attending to it. Looking outward was closely linked to turning back toward myself, for what felt real in me.' (2012, p. 16).

Duma also describes a feeling of being held by this phenomenon, which she associates with the concept of transitional space as put forward by psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott. Winnicott contends that transitional space first arises during infancy, when a child begins to experience its identity as separate from that of its mother or primary caregiver. The child adopts an object — typically a blanket or stuffed toy — to serve as intermediary between self and other, which facilitates the 'initiation of a relationship between the child and the world' (Winnicott 1953, p. 15). But Winnicott held that transitional space remains important throughout our lives, referring to it in the context of adulthood as 'an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (ibid. p. 3). Like the infant's blanket or teddy bear, this intermediate zone 'is an area which is not challenged, because no claim is made on its behalf except that it shall exist as a resting-place for the individual engaged in the perpetual human task of keeping inner and outer reality separate yet inter-related' (ibid.) Winnicott saw creativity and the arts as inhabitants of this third area, which he considered to be 'in direct continuity with the play area of the small child who is "lost" in play' (ibid. p. 15).

'In light of Winnicott,' Duma writes, 'I reflect now on how my camera can serve as a portal to potential space. How, within the frame of the viewfinder, the intermediary area between my imagination and reality can come together in play. The once familiar building with arching lines and space is the "found" object of my imagination. I see, in the image of its gentle curves, the arms of a loved one lost, the arms holding me in the moment. I rest my aloneness in the spaces between. And in them, I feel the missed presence within me. It is all of this at once ... In holding the image, I feel held. In this space of potential, I experience myself as separate yet connected, and bridge the gap between what is lost and what is being found. It is a space for creativity both in my art and in my living' (2012, p. 17).

## how to not begin



Several months before starting my PhD I bought 432 smiley face badges off the Internet. This was not an entirely random decision. A few weeks prior to this purchase I had bought a dozen of the badges while browsing a discount shop, on the hunt for props to use in a game that I was helping to design. We needed a small, subtle signifier that participants could wear to identify themselves as players amidst a non-playing festival crowd. I knew the badges weren't right for this particular game, but I grabbed them anyway. Like the marbles, matchboxes and other items I was in the habit of collecting from dollar shops and newsagents, they might be right for something else. They shared a certain quality that some objects possess, an invitation to be appropriated or amplified beyond the everyday.

By the time I got home from the shop I had an idea. The badges could be rabbit holes; invitations to play the perception-shifting urban game that I was planning to create. And the badges themselves would be a game: I planned to scatter them around the city, in places where they might be noticed by a drifting gaze. If enough people found the

badges and started wearing them in public, would those people begin to take notice of each other? What effect might that have?

The invitational affordances of the badge itself (*pick me up, put me on*) suggested that it might make for a good rabbit hole. But the true potential of these badges, I believed, was in the semiotics of their specific design. The smiley face, in its ubiquity and ambiguity, belongs to nobody — and therefore to everybody. It has been appropriated by such disparate interests as the acid house music scene, Alan Moore's gritty graphic novel *The Watchmen* and the innocuous narrative of *Forrest Gump*, and can no longer be reduced to any single inflection of meaning. It is the Mona Lisa of pop culture. As soon as I bought the first lot of badges, I started seeing smiley faces everywhere.

When I placed my order for the second lot I had no idea how the badges would lead players into my larger game, or what exactly that game might be. I felt like I needed to have all 454 of them in front of me to intuit my next move. That the multitude of their presence would somehow impart a clue.

The badges arrived, and I was excited, but when I unpacked them and laid them out before me I found that they had not come with instructions. My map was simply 454 mute faces staring up at me. A month later they went back into their box; my whole life went into boxes, as I left another life behind.



## postcards from the edge



The badges stayed boxed up for six months, while I lived out the lease on my temporary home. My new suburb squatted indifferently on the border between urban and suburban Melbourne, dropping off at one edge into a deep valley. The place was a void; a blank spot in my mind. Despite all of my walking and photographing and thinking and not thinking, I couldn't find my way. My house sat at the bottom of the valley and the nothingness seemed to gather there. The only time I felt the world come back to me was when I escaped onto the endless concrete ribbon of the Capital City Trail, following the winding path up over the freeway and down under it again, along the squalid creek that had been concreted in so heavily that I first mistook it for a drain.

I was haunting the ragged edge of the city, and although I didn't fully realise it, I was lonely. The images I brought back from those walks were postcards, messages from absent others. I photographed what they had left behind: graffiti, a loaf of bread, a tattered

armchair with a view. One day I came across two shopping trolleys tipped sideways in the middle of the creek. They looked almost sculptural, and at the same time morosely out of place. I photographed them. Over the next few months I began to encounter more abandoned trolleys in strange places. They were in pairs, gangs, never alone. I photographed them too. The day before I moved out, coming down a long, steep set of stairs in a park just by my house, I met a lone trolley leaning crookedly against the rail. A front wheel dangled freely.

“Go home trolley, you’re drunk,” I muttered fondly, and took one last photo before I left.

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-one/postcards-from-the-edge/>

## exit

I left the valley of the trolleys in the dead of winter. My sojourn had not exactly been the salve I'd hoped for, and I was relieved that my lease was finally up. Cold and sick and lonely, I fled in the opposite direction.

My new neighbourhood was almost exactly the same distance from the city centre as the last, but it was a world apart. For starters, it was reasonably flat. I didn't have to haul my tired body up an impossible mountain just to go anywhere except the creek. I could walk out the door and stroll down the street — to the grocery store, the library, the park. Also, it was lively. Cafes, bars, shops: there were people everywhere. Not the thronging chaos of the business district, but a reassuring ebb and flow that pulsed in keeping with our daily lives. Work, school, play, rest. I exhaled with relief — I had left the bardo.

This time, I was determined not to overthink the game. Despite my best intentions I had spent all winter wrestling with my sketchbook, too anxious to strike out toward any potential destination until I had built the road to take me there.

When spring began to stir I unpacked the badges, gathered up a handful and walked out the door.

a door cracks open



As I set off with the badges I thought about this game. What did it feel like?

I knew that I wanted the badges to be discovered by people who had allowed their eyes to wander; who had slipped their focus, if only for an instant, into a place that claimed no purpose. I also knew that I wanted the badges to be perceived as treasure rather than trash; deliberate offerings, not detritus of the street.

This was my only guidance when I left the house that first afternoon. I also brought some small manila tags, vaguely thinking that I might inscribe them with a few words that were evocative of the moment and attach them to the badges.

Within the first few minutes I found that I was establishing guidelines about placement: no residential properties; no shopfront doors or windows. Which left me with public space in

the strictest sense: benches, phone booths, other infrastructural odds and ends. Then another impulse: try to stay invisible. Let the badges bloom anonymously into place. Eventually these constraints pushed me off the main street and into the spaces behind.

It was quieter here, away from the quickening pace of peak hour. Exactly what I needed. I drifted with slack purpose, looking for the right kind of spots to leave the badges. Up on High Street this had begun to reveal things that were visibly invisible: grates, drainpipes, strange crumbling holes in walls. These revelations continued now, opening up a network of paint-spattered laneways that would have otherwise remained undiscovered. My boots crunched on dead leaves and broken glass; I felt like I was the only one in this world.

Twilight stole in, violet and electric, and as it deepened the synchronicities began to crackle. There were messages in everything: printed signs, graffiti, even the arrangement of litter in the gutters. As I turned the corner out of a laneway and onto a quiet street, the crescendo: a towering brick facade covered in the intricate lacework of dormant vines. It was stunning in the dying light. Adjacent was another brick warehouse, a scrawl of white painted across its face: *Everything happens for a reason.*

A very confusing thing had just happened in my life, that had been on my mind all evening. The graffiti gave me no answers, but still made me exhale with recognition. I stood there, eyes pricked with tears, as darkness fell. When the last light leaked away I turned and walked toward home.

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-one/a-door-cracks-open/>



## in praise of shadows



*There is an old song that says “the brushwood we gather — stack it together,  
it makes a hut; pull it apart, a field once more”.*  
— Jun'ichirō Tanizaki (1977, p. 29)

My route home took me past some of the badges that I had left behind earlier in the evening. I checked on them, but with no expectations. It had only been a few hours. So I was excited to discover that one of them was already absent — and from the most mundane of spots: a gap between some wooden boards in a dusty, unpleasant corridor made of construction scaffolding. I felt a little thrill of connection, and hoped that I had brightened someone's night.

Within the next 24 hours, six more badges disappeared. Ten days later, only three remained. I was fascinated by the inscrutable logic of it all — which ones went, and when, and why some never did. Every walk in my new neighbourhood became a part of

the game, fraught with playful anticipation as I approached each of my remaining spots. And they did become my spots. Even now when I find myself in that neighbourhood again, each spot seems to wink back at me when I walk by.

For the next evolution of the game I stamped a pair of cryptic phrases and a phone number on those manila tags that had gone unused before, and attached them to the badges. This time I established a few guidelines before I left the house. I would distribute 22 badges, 11 on each side of the main street, between two points that seemed to mark the psychic, commercial and social boundaries of the area. I had also created some stickers to match the badges, and planned to put them up using the same rules. Conversely (and perhaps perversely), I had zero plans for what I would do if someone used the number on the tags to contact me. ▲

▼ Twenty-two was not a number that I arrived at randomly. Rather, it was a reference to the Major Arcana of the Tarot, which contains 22 "keys" or cards. The Tarot has long interested me as a creative device, and has featured in several of my previous works. The Parallaxis could never quite make up its mind about the Tarot; even now the question remains open as to its relevance.

Compared to the magic of the first drop session, this second outing was a failure. The quotas and boundaries were oppressive, dictating placement rather than letting the streetscape make suggestions. The tags were clunky and prevented me from slipping badges into sly and secret spots; they also precluded places that might be exposed to rain. And the stickers competed with the badges for my attention, as they required me to focus on different aspects of the street. There was no flow, no fun, no frisson of deeper meaning. Perhaps the one welcome failure was that no one ever called that number.

But of course the evening wasn't really a failure, in the larger scheme of things. Such is the appealing nature of experiments. I learned that my evolving rules were not about setting deliberate constraints to work within. Rather, they were tools for understanding the relationships at play within systems I created or encountered; an ad-hoc game of tuning in to forces that I would not otherwise perceive. ▲

▼ Although I didn't have the language yet to describe or even fully understand this method, I was working propositionally (Jones 2009).

After this "failed" outing I continued to explore my neighbourhood, with the badges and then also with my camera. As I explored I became aware of a shift: I was actually the player of this game. Or at least, I was one of the players. And perhaps — although maybe this is hindsight — the making of the game was actually the game?

With these nascent thoughts to keep me company, I drifted far and wide through new terrain. Up the high street, down the laneways, into the industrial hinterlands. Pushed and pulled by the magnetic force of place, I began to see and feel things differently. I learned where the light reflected and the shadows collected; where the stillness was stagnant and where it trembled with more. Rhythms, patterns, moods: the subtle city started to unfold.▲

▼ The French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, whose prolific writing on the city has shaped much of the modern conversation on urbanism, observed this dynamic yet subtle patterning of the city in his theory of rhythmanalysis. 'The characteristic features are really temporal and rhythmical, not visual,' Lefebvre (1996, p. 223). writes of the city, and in particular of the neighbourhood. 'To extricate the rhythms requires



attentiveness and a certain amount of time' (ibid.).

In the beginning this had been about the badges; about leaving them, about them being taken. But in the end the badges turned out to be like the rules I had created to distribute them: merely a device for tuning in to something more. The real game was between the streets and me. Together we played, and we made each other real. ▲

▼ Here I return to Winnicott, who also believed that communication with a subjective Other fosters an experience of feeling real. This enriching interplay between self and Other is the basis of his transitional space, 'an intermediate area of experiencing, to which inner reality and external life both contribute' (Winnicott 1953, p. 3).

Here as well I introduce a proposition, which developed throughout my journey but only became lucid near the very end. This is what I'm moving toward:

Conversing with a psychological Other that is symbolic and implied may foster the capacity to perceive a phenomenological Other that is animate and present. When we engage with this animate Other our experience of feeling real moves from the subjective to the intersubjective — which is the realm of real magic.

#### inner, outer, middle

Winnicott (1965) saw the psychologically healthy individual as engaging in three different layers of communication, each with its own relationship to the "real" or hidden self. At the innermost was a silent communication with one's own subjective reality; at the outmost an explicit communication with the world; and in the middle a 'third or

intermediate form of communication that slides out of playing into cultural experience of every kind' (ibid. p. 188).

While Winnicott maintained that explicit communication was pleasurable, he also associated it with the 'false or compliant self' of the split personality (ibid. p. 183). Conversely, he saw the silent communication of the inner self as essential to 'the establishment of the feeling of real' (ibid. p. 184). 'Forever immune from the reality principle,' he wrote, 'it is, like the music of the spheres, absolutely personal. It belongs to being alive' (ibid. p. 192). Winnicott believed that 'in health, it is out of this' inner communication that intermediate and explicit communication 'naturally arises' (ibid.).

What Winnicott describes is an innermost self that is able to be nourished and made real through an entirely subjective, interior experience of the world. When we are well we are able to bring awareness of this inner world into a middle zone, a liminal space. Here it manifests as creativity as we engage with Others that we inflect with meaning while knowing that these entities exist outside of our own making.

### absence and presence

But who or what exactly are these Others? In the most literal sense they are the physical and conceptual objects of our symbolic play — whether the makeshift toys of the small child or the cultural artefacts and everyday encounters of the adult. However, this one-dimensional reading misses the true magic of play and other liminal experiences; a magic through which the liminal 'simultaneously transcends and maintains reality' (Varga 2011, p. 2). This magic lies in two complementary understandings of the object, both of which suggest that it also possesses subjecthood.

Extending Winnicott's (1969) theory of object usage, philosopher Somogy Varga

(2011) posits that the object as it exists outside of the subject's inner world is more than just an inanimate intermediary between self and other. Rather, it is imbued with the presence of absent but implied Others. Indeed, Varga suggests that symbolic play relies upon 'the sense of the continued presence of others in objects' — and in fact 'expresses a primordial indebtedness to the other' (ibid. p. 4).

It is within this intersubjective field of play, 'characterized by a strong sense of the presence or proximity of an other' (ibid. p. 3) where psychology finds an unlikely counterpart in phenomenology. Using the language and conceptual framework of his own field, ecologist and philosopher David Abram expresses a relationship between self and Other that parallels the ideas of Winnicott and Varga:

'And so I am brought, like Husserl, to recognize at least two regions of the experiential or phenomenal field: one of phenomena that unfold entirely for me — images that arise, as it were, on this side of my body — and another region of phenomena that are, evidently, responded to and experienced by other embodied subjects as well as by myself. These latter phenomena are still subjective — they appear to me within a field of experience coloured by my mood and my current concerns — and yet I cannot alter or dissipate them at will, for they seem to be buttressed by many involvements besides my own. That tree bending in the wind, this cliff wall, the cloud drifting overhead: these are not merely subjective; they are intersubjective phenomena — phenomena experienced by a multiplicity of sensing subjects' (Abram 1997, p. 38).

A tree, a cliff, a cloud.

Graffiti, a loaf of bread, a little yellow badge. My creek walks and smiley face

experiments were indeed the game of absent others that I had imagined them to be.

### multiplicities

But what of the tree itself, the cloud, the shadows and the stillness? What implied Others do they invoke?

Here the phenomenological offers possibilities beyond the psychological, suggesting as it does an intersubjectivity that extends to a true Other. Abram articulates these possibilities through his field research on shamanism:

'When a magician spoke of a power or "presence" lingering in the corner of his house, I learned to notice the ray of sunlight that was then pouring in through a chink in the roof, illuminating a column of drifting dust, and to realize that that column of light was indeed a power, influencing the air currents by its warmth, and indeed influencing the whole mood of the room; although I had not consciously seen it before, it had already been structuring my experience' (ibid. p. 20).

Abram's central thesis is an 'ecology of magic' (ibid.) that calls for a renewed human relationship with the 'wild and multiplicitous otherness' of the more-than-human world.

'For the largest part of our species' existence, humans have negotiated relationships with every aspect of the sensuous surroundings, exchanging possibilities with every flapping form, with each textured surface and shivering entity that we happened to focus upon. All could speak, articulating in gesture and whistle and sigh a shifting web of meanings that we felt on our skin or inhaled through our nostrils or focused with our listening ears, and to which we replied — whether with sounds, or through movements, or minute shifts of mood. The colour of sky, the rush of waves — every

aspect of the earthly sensuous could draw us into a relationship fed with curiosity and spiced with danger. Every sound was a voice, every scrape or blunder was a meeting — with Thunder, with Oak, with Dragonfly. And from all of these relationships our collective sensibilities were nourished' (ibid. p ix).

Tree, cloud, shadow, stillness.

If play amplifies our sense of the real through 'the primordial presence of others' (Varga 2011, p. 11), what frequencies might crackle into life if we attune to a more expansive field of Others?

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-one/in-praise-of-shadows/>

## becoming

Now that I felt like I was finally doing something, I had reason to return to my sketchbook. Not to twist myself into more deductive knots, but to make note of what was unfolding as I worked. *Document everything*, my supervisors had urged. And so I did. Primarily with written words, but also occasionally with photos, audio recordings and rudimentary sketches. I captured the sublime as well as the mundane, trusting that time would sort out which was which. I recorded what I thought I might do next; what I actually ended up doing; the effects of these actions both external and internal; synchronous details that I only noticed later while reviewing previous documentation; and back around to my ideas for what I might do next, as influenced by what had come before.

Attending to my actions in this way made new structures visible, much like how the streets had opened up when I started tuning in to their details. This was the beginning of my reflexive practice.

It was also the beginning of my reflective practice, as I would eventually discover. The work has evolved in cycles, manifesting and concluding of their own accord, and at the end of each cycle I've found myself returning to my notes. Sometimes I review just the most recent cycle, other times I'm pulled further back, fascinated to discover a trail of pebbles that I've left glowing in the moonlight. Every so often I wake in the middle of the night and fumble for my stack of sketchbooks, looking for a single detail to solve the mystery of how something came to be. But of course there is no single moment when anything comes to be — only the moment when we first catch sight of its becoming.

These cyclical reflections often generate new notes, and new dimensions to my understanding — though the progression to some form of consolidated truth is rarely linear or neat. Interspersed with the reflexive notes, my reflections lie in wait for me each time I pass that way again. Sometimes they make me cringe. More often they make me

worry about how much I seem to repeatedly forget, that I must then come to understand again another way. Maybe that's just how it is. Maybe some things are too fundamental to behold in their entirety from the splinter of one angle; too big to grasp at once and keep. We must encounter each new facet as a stranger, until we have recognised the whole. And perhaps we never will. Maybe that's just how it is.

And of course this is what I'm doing now, as I write these words. Going through my notes, both reflective and reflexive. Finding what still glows. Weaving those words into these words, these new insights that will lie in wait until I pass this way again. The story continues to unfold, rarely linear or neat. ▲

▼ If my shadow games were the beginning of a more conscious relationship with Other, my reflexive and reflective methods were the beginning of a more deliberate relationship with myself within the research. This methodology can be seen as both the origin and the expression of the doubling structure that has reverberated through The Parallaxis, serving as it does to simultaneously enact and articulate the forces at work within the project. Ambiguity. Uncertainty. Reciprocity. Change.

And as counterparts in methodology, these reflexive and reflective methods form another doubling that constitutes The Parallaxis.

### moving in

In becoming a reflexive researcher with a phenomenological grounding, I necessarily became both the instrument and the subject of my research. *It was my own traversal of the liminal that was to unfold.* The making of the game became the playing of the game, and the playing of the game — the *experience* of playing the game — became the research. This implication of the practitioner within the process is a

defining characteristic of reflexivity.

'An argument can be made that reflexive practice is attuned to self-organization, and that self-organization is a natural process often suppressed', writes social systems analyst Kent C. Myers (2010, p. 21), who sees reflexivity as a useful approach for dealing with the uncertainty of chaotic or complex emergent systems.

This attuning force bends both ways: 'I understand researcher reflexivity as the capacity of the researcher to acknowledge how their own experiences and contexts (which might be fluid and changing) inform the process and outcomes of inquiry' writes psychologist and academic Kim Etherington (2004, p. 31). Etherington conflates reflexive practice with heuristic methodologies in psychological research, which are concerned with 'using "self" as a major tool in the research process' (ibid. p. 16):

'In its purest form, heuristics is a passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through the internal pathways of the self... When utilized as a framework for research, it offers a disciplined pursuit of essential meanings connected with everyday human experiences' (Douglass & Moustakas 1985, p. 39).

The uncertainty of the everyday makes it particularly suited to a reflexive methodology. 'All representations of reality are incomplete and unreliable,' Meyers writes of the reflexive practice landscape. 'Interventions have unanticipated effects and upshots. Interventions take account of impermanence and the need for continued development and intervention' (2010, p. 20).

Etherington likewise acknowledges the shifting nature of the knowledge that is arrived



at through reflexivity. 'I am aware that my understanding is still incomplete and ever-changing and that by the time this book is published I will probably have reached another stage upon my journey,' she writes. 'So this chapter needs to be read as simply one way of telling a "story of reflexivity"' (2004 p. 37).

The splinter of one angle ... we must encounter each new facet as a stranger.

### moving out

If reflexivity is of the now, reflection is of the later. As I noted in my journal when I first became aware that reflection was one of my methods: *These sightlines are different than the acute angle of the present moment; no more or less valid, but valuable for their unique perspective. Peering out across them now I can see myself almost as if in multiple dimensions, knowing-but-not-knowing exactly what I was doing.*

Autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis observes similarly: 'The advantage of writing close to the time of the event is that it doesn't take much effort to access lived emotions — they're often there whether you want them to be or not. The disadvantage is that being so involved in the scene emotionally means that it's difficult to get outside it to analyse from a cultural perspective. Yet, both of these processes, moving in and moving out, are necessary to produce an effective autoethnography. That's why it's good to write about an event while your feelings are still intense and then to go back to it when you're emotionally distant. I've had students who were great at getting inside emotional experience, but they had tunnel vision. They couldn't move around in the experience. They were unable to see it as it might appear to others' (1999 p. 675).

The "moving out" of reflective practice becomes the ordered, rationalising partner to

the "moving in" of reflexivity's fluid intuition. It is the storytelling that makes sense of actions and impressions. 'I see reflection as a mainly cognitive process,' Etherington writes (2004, p. 29). 'These reflections usually stay at a conscious level, using what we already know about ourselves, while at the same time opening up the possibility of knowing ourselves better as we create new meanings and gain new understandings through the process of writing and reflection' (ibid.).

Autoethnographer Art Bochner suggests that reflection does more than just enable us to know ourselves better; like reflexive practice, it actually changes us. 'The meaning of prenarrative experience is constituted in its narrative expression,' Bochner writes (Ellis & Bochner 2000, p. 745). 'So the question is not, "Does my story reflect my past accurately?" as if I were holding up a mirror to my past. Rather I must ask, 'What are the consequences my story produces? Why kind of person does it shape me into? What new possibilities does it introduce for living my life?'" (ibid. p. 746).

'Through the narrative activity of self-creation,' Bochner concludes, 'we seek to become identical to the story that we tell' (ibid.).

What story am I telling, through the playing of this game? Not a tale of once-upon-a-time, but one of here, and now, and me. And yet while I am certainly the teller of the story, I have never been entirely sure that I am the creator of the game. Like the methodology of its making, The Parallaxis seems to be a more reciprocal affair.

## detours and intersections



I have referred to my wandering walks as drifting. This is a word and a concept that I will return to repeatedly, and as such I should clarify my points of departure from its most well-known incarnation, the Situationist *dérive*. The *dérive* was a project of Guy Debord, who described it as 'a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (1958, p. 62). The *dérive* involves 'playful-constructive behaviour and awareness of psychogeographical effects' (ibid.) and thus should be regarded as 'quite different from the classic notions of journey or stroll' (ibid.).

I felt an affinity with psychogeography and the drift from the moment I first encountered the words. They were effortlessly evocative, hardly seeming to require definition or explication. Even before I began to identify my own walks as drifting, I saw in these words a relationship to place that so perfectly expressed the potential of the ambiguous city. Psychogeography seemed to be at the heart of the game that I wanted to create.

But when the chill of winter foreclosed any further badge experiments and I finally sat down to read Debord's Situationist texts, I was at first surprised and then put off. In his attempt to convey the essence of the 'charmingly vague' (1955, p. 8) concept of psychogeography, Debord communicates something of what I was expecting to encounter in his theories, and have found to be true in my own wanderings: 'The sudden change of ambiance in a street within the space of a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres; the path of least resistance that is automatically followed in aimless strolls (and which has no relation to the physical contour of the terrain); the appealing or repelling character of certain places' (ibid. p. 10) — yes, I recognised all of this. But then: 'Psychogeography sets for itself the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, whether consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (ibid. p. 8).

Precise laws? Specific effects? This airless rigor is followed by Debord's assertion that the *dérive* encompasses not only its implied fluidity of approach but also 'its necessary contradiction: the domination of psychogeographical variations by the knowledge and calculation of their possibilities' (1958, p. 62).

What Debord seems to be proposing is a sort of gamified pseudoscience that would dam up the city's psychic river the better to study its currents. Never has a methodology seemed less suited to the task — and it certainly wasn't the way into my subtle city.

But of course the Situationists were neither the first nor the last to engage with these ideas. Indeed, the suggestion of a psychic relationship between the city and its inhabitants is as old as the city itself. As Merlin Coverly writes in his (admittedly quite culturally narrow) biography of the subject, 'psychogeography may usefully be viewed less as the product of a particular time and place than as the meeting point of a number of ideas and traditions with interwoven histories' (2010, p. 12). Coverly traces these traditions back

to a lineage of writers in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century London (Daniel Defoe, William Blake, Thomas de Quincey), who 'share a perception of the city as a site of mystery and seek to reveal the true nature that lies beneath the flux of the everyday' (ibid. p. 17). Defoe's 1722 *Journal of the Plague Year* is the story of a man who wanders through London attempting to make his own subjective sense of the 'unknowable labyrinth' (ibid. p. 20) that the city has become; Blake's spiritual verse is haunted by the sense of 'an eternal landscape underpinning our own' (ibid. p. 23); and de Quincey's 1821 *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* chronicles the author's own hallucinatory urban wanderings, in which 'the city becomes a riddle, a puzzle still perplexing writers and walkers to this day' (ibid.). From here Coverly moves to the *flâneurs* of Paris (Charles Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin), and then on to the Surrealists' involvement with psychogeographic ideas, before arriving at 'the stifling orthodoxy of Debord's situationist dogma' (ibid. p. 11), which he characterises as a failed enterprise that 'was not to provide the last word in the theorising of urban walking' (ibid. p. 117). ▲

▼ Every historical overview must draw its boundaries somewhere, be they in space or time. But what is consistently missing from histories of walking in the city are the voices of women. The writer Lauren Elkin believes that this omission is long overdue for redress.

'It's strange: for as long as there have been cities, there have been women living in them,' observes Elkin (2016, para. 2), 'yet if we want to know what it's like to walk thoughtfully in the city, there is only a long tradition of writing by men that tells us.'

'But there have always been women writing about cities,' Elkin continues (ibid. para. 4), 'chronicling their lives, telling stories, taking pictures, making films, engaging with the city any way they can ... To suggest that there could be no *flâneuse* because she

wasn't literally a female flâneur is to limit the ways women have interacted with the city to the ways men have interacted with the city. Perhaps the answer is not to attempt to make a woman fit a masculine concept, but to redefine the concept itself. It's time to recognise a counter-tradition of the flâneuse, looking back to George Sand, to Jean Rhys, or in our own day to Sophie Calle, or Laura Oldfield Ford. If we tunnel back, we find there always was a flâneuse passing Baudelaire in the street.'

To the ranks of contemporary *flâneuse* I would add the Australian artist Lesley Duxbury, who walks primarily in remote regions but has also engaged with urban environments (Duxbury 2008); and the Australian writer Sophie Cunningham, whose book *Melbourne* (2011) was one of the first texts to join the bibliography of this project. 'Melbourne's a city you get to know from the inside out — you have to walk it to love it,' Cunningham writes (ibid. p. 7). Long before I knew the direction that this project would take, I had already highlighted those words.

Ironically, it was Debord himself who guided me toward a more sympathetic theory of the affective city. His snide dismissal of the Surrealists, in their embrace of the imaginary and its surfacing of the unconscious (Debord 1955), piqued my curiosity. I went looking for more of the 'empty babble' (ibid. p.11) associated with the avant garde art movement, and found both ally and inspiration in contemporary Surrealist Max Cafard (pseudonym of philosopher John Clark). Key to the evolution of *The Parallaxis* has been Cafard's essay *Deep Play in the City: From the Situationist Dérive to Surre(gion)al Exploration*, which proposes a relationship to place that is radically opposed to the psychogeography of Debord (and deeply resonant with Abram's ecology of magic):

'Deep play is openness to the experience of diverse, interpenetrating regionalities. We might think that when we engage in deep play we are merely playing some kind of

game, or even that we are pursuing some kind of game, that it is like a safari or scavenger hunt for strange objects, which can then be exhibited in our dada collection, or used expand our surrealist resume, or to add a notch on our Situationist revolver. But on the deeper level of analysis, deep play is not a big game hunt, nor is it playing a game in any usual sense. Rather it is entering into the play of the things themselves, and the many interpenetrating worlds of those things themselves (for there is no thing in itself, only things outside themselves and outsides inside themselves). Deep play is the interplay of psychoregion, mythoregion, socioregion, ethnoregion, bioregion, georegion, and all the other interpenetrating, mutually transforming regionalities. In deep play we enter into that interplay. If we want to think of it as our playing a game, or hunting game, we must think of it at the same time as the game playing us, or playfully preying on us' (Cafard 2008, para. 35).

### coda

It's six months prior to the badge experiments and my subsequent research on the Situationists. I've just moved into the valley and have yet to begin my walks along the creek, but without a car I'm walking everywhere through my new neighbourhood. I try to take a different route each time I run an errand, to map this placeless place and to alleviate my boredom. One day on my way to buy groceries I encounter a cryptic footpath epigraph, carved in the cement. My French is rusty; I can't quite translate the unfamiliar phrase. I take a photo and remind myself to look it up when I get home. ▲

▼ *Sous les pavés, la plage*: Beneath the street, the beach. Situationist graffiti from the May 1968 student protests in Paris (Coulten et al. 2016).

everything is here



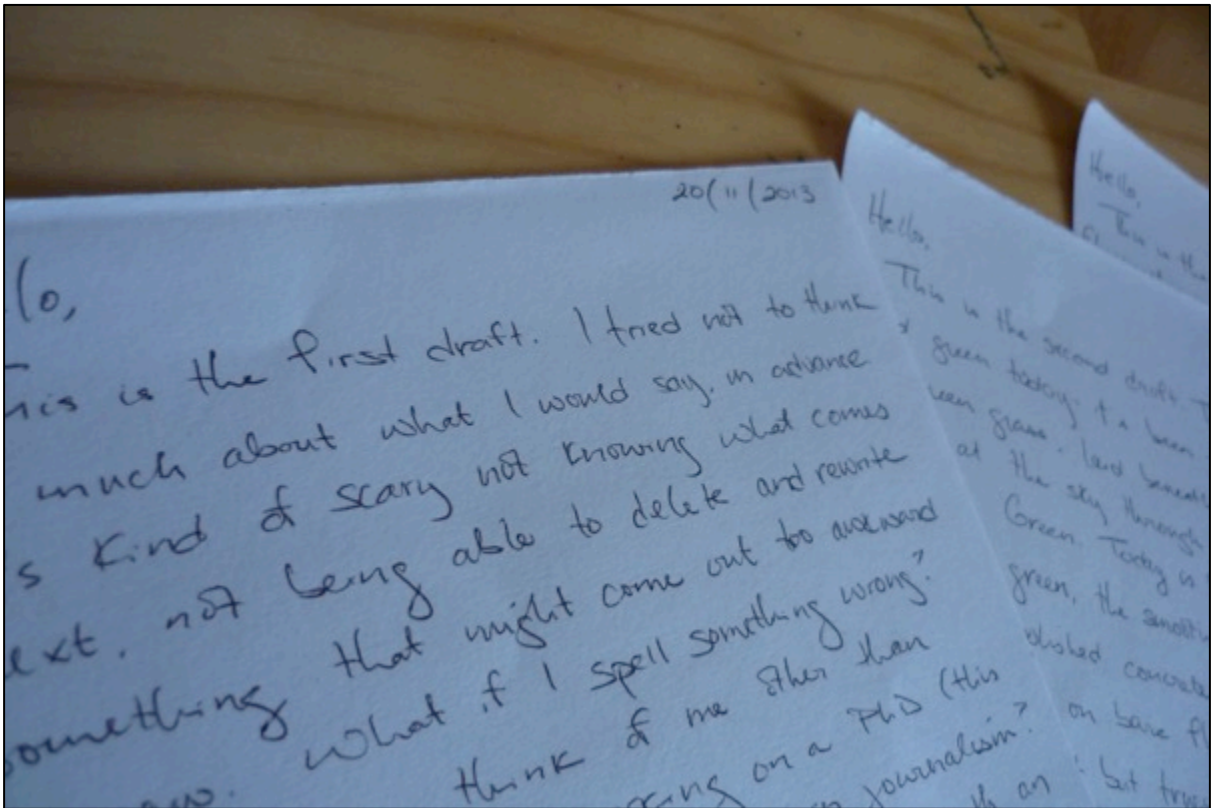
*31 October 2013*

Spring is nearly summer and the air tonight is so soft. Walking after dinner, Emma wants to show me a bit of local magic that she's recently discovered. We meander down side streets that I haven't yet explored, and then we turn a corner. There it is. My wall of sleeping vines, transformed. A great green field of ivy breathing softly in the moonlight.

On the adjacent wall, new graffiti covers old. The words that once spoke to me are faded, historical; part of the tangled pattern but perceivable only in memory.



## alchemy for beginners



Unable yet to articulate much of this understanding, I failed my first attempt at confirmation of candidature. The research question was unclear, my panel said, and the badges with their readymade design lacked authorship. But the element of risk inherent in my methods had potential, I was told, should I decide to work with it more intentionally.

Daunted but determined, I packed away the badges and tried to come up with something else. In the six weeks that I had before my second confirmation seminar, I made a small body of work that attempted to address the issues raised by my panel. The work was almost comically opposite to the badges: textually dense, intensely personal, and unambiguous in its request for a response.

I never ended up distributing the work, or developing it beyond what I made during those few weeks. It was too dense, too personal, too unambiguous. My second confirmation

seminar had also left me questioning why I felt the need for an audience response at all. My panel members had framed the issue as one of giving versus taking, and had rebuked me for trying to engage in the latter. But in hindsight this was not the issue at all — or at least, not the issue on which the game hinged. Rather it was a question of seeking dialog with the wrong counterparts, although the game and I would both need to evolve before I could see this.

Those few weeks of work between my confirmation seminars were barely a flicker in the progression of the game, but they would prove relevant nonetheless. I refer to the artefacts that I created during this time as the drafts, for that is what they are. First drafts, only drafts, successive drafts — an attempt to write my way through a seismic shock in a year that had already left me shaken. After an unexplained absence of 26 years, my biological father had made contact with me. We were in correspondence. He was sending old baby photos I had never seen; I was answering his many questions about my current life. But at his insistence, we weren't talking about his departure or his unexpected return. I felt like a hostage to this demand, afraid that he might disappear again, and so I started writing letters to myself as well.

I wrote three letters in total. Each one was a collaboration with time and place. I carried my good pen and a pad of writing paper everywhere I went, and when my emotions welled up and threatened to spill over I looked for the right place to sit and write. A pub, a park, the top of a hill. In the writing I tried to start with the place itself; tried to open up to the specificity of the moment and let it guide me into a more personal reflection. For each draft I gave myself the front and back of a single A5 sheet — no more, no less.

A theme of letting go quickly emerged, and so I planned to insert each draft into an air mail envelope, attach it to a white balloon and leave it somewhere near the place where

it had been written. The envelope would also contain a postcard addressed to me, that the finder could use to release a burden of their own.

Fortunately helium tanks are expensive, and difficult to procure without a car. That's what I told myself anyway, as I delayed and delayed on launching the drafts into the world. Reading them again tonight for the first time in two years, I'm so grateful for my procrastination. As personal artefacts the drafts are immensely valuable, comprising the only record of a pivotal moment in my life. And as creative artefacts they convey far more about my methods than I could ever reconstruct from my notes about this phase.

In the drafts I see the game take its first conscious turn toward autobiography, a movement that would prove essential to the evolution of my methodology. I also see a more conscious turn toward place as a collaborator, which likewise would inform the later stages of the game. And in the synchrony of these gestures; this turning inward and at the same time turning outward, I see the mechanisms of a certain magic begin to manifest.

part two



## spontaneous combustion



The summer holidays are a psychic lull in Australia, especially for an immigrant with no family in the hemisphere. Friends and housemates head home, university campuses empty out. On the last day of the term my candidature was confirmed, and then the world went quiet. I didn't know if I was lonely or relieved.

Three days after Christmas, in the hushed dry heat, I sat down in my makeshift kitchen studio with no intention. This was time off. Time for me, to mess around with the flotsam and jetsam that I loved to collect. I reached for a box of matches. Without thinking I took a match from the box, picked up a pen, and wrote a fragment of a favourite poem on the splintery scrap of wood. I felt a frisson. Almost. I took another matchstick from the box, paused briefly, and wrote: *Your last love*. I picked up another match: *Your first love*. Then: *Your biggest regret*. *Your greatest fear*. *Your best idea*. *Your longest con*. For the next hour, in what felt like a trance, I carved words onto matchsticks. The pen skittered and

the ink bled. I wrote slowly. When the words stopped coming I put down the pen and looked up. The stillness hovered for a moment, and then I cried. Finally I had let go of thinking, planning, worrying — and something real and magical had taken shape. My relief was immense.

Over the next few weeks I returned to the matchsticks, adding to the collection. I could have made a list on paper, but from the beginning it felt essential to write directly onto the matchsticks as the ideas arrived. It became a meditation and a ritual. As I worked, I tried not to work; to remain as open to the process as I had been on the first day. I allowed my mind to wander and my memories to surface. I thought about the path in life that I had chosen, and the various paths that I had not. I thought about the feelings that were washing over me. I tried not to think about the feelings, and to let them just wash over me. I tried to be okay with everything — including not being okay.

In lighter moments, the radio would suggest a matchstick. At some point during the badge experiments I had stopped listening to my usual instrumental electronic music while working in the studio, in favour of older, earthier songs with vocals. It was good to have some company. And one day when I was struggling for inspiration, a song lyric had jumped out to offer just the phrase I needed. My companion had become a collaborator, quite unexpectedly.

As I worked on the matchsticks I began to get a sense of what they were about. The first dozen or so had come unbidden; after that, I had to step back and look at what was emerging in order to keep going. What I saw was the universality of human experience, encoded in the specificity of the individual. I also saw a Zen-like challenge: to release the good as well as the bad; to embrace the bad as well as the good — and perhaps to question the distinction between the two?

Once the collection felt complete I made 21 more sets, copying them out at the local library because I had no air-conditioning and Melbourne was in the grip of a brutal heat wave. Day after day I sat at a long crowded table, sleep-deprived and wilted, grateful for the opportunity to do something simple. My neck ached, my fingers cramped, my eyes blurred. There was only the pile of matchboxes in front of me, and on the final day, a neighbour who kept glancing curiously at them. Finally, as he was rising to leave, he asked what I was doing. When I told him, his face cracked into an incredulous grin. He introduced himself as Charlie Sublet, a local artist working mainly in photography. One of his major projects was a series of photo narratives contained within Redhead matchboxes (Sublet 2011).

It was 42 degrees outside, and I felt like I was hallucinating. I gave Charlie one of my completed sets as a gift, and we parted ways.







for a while with experiments that were more material than spatial, and I began by attempting to determine why the matchsticks were so evocative. What exactly did they have to say about that curious dualism between magic and real?

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*(Image used with permission.)*

## playing with fire

In truth I did not proceed directly onto this study of the matchsticks. My first instinct was to lunge at the eclectic inventory of dollar-shop purchases that cluttered the shelves of my studio. Surely this was the best way forward, to stick with the material process of making. It had taken me so long to arrive at a fluid response to the moment — I worried that if I stopped to think the magic would evaporate.

But as I began to pull various items from the shelves I realised that I was already thinking. *What might I do with this? What else should I maybe go out and buy?* It was no good — the magic had already dried up.

If I was going to think, then, I could at least follow the lead that the matchsticks had provided. I could think in a directed way. How did the matchsticks — and the way in which I had altered them — relate to my interests in ambiguity, possibility and the real?

To begin with there was the idea of risk, still fresh in my mind from confirmation. The risk that my panel had referred to was that of failure: the risk of working in conditions that are unstable, both materially and relationally. But the risk that I was more interested in was that of consequence: the risk of working with conditions that may also be unstable, but are primarily ambiguous. This was the risk of Neurocam, which withheld any indication of whether it should be taken as real. It was also the magic of Neurocam, for this ambiguity allowed participants to create their own liminal reality. Blast Theory projects like *Uncle Roy All Around You* offer a fleeting taste of this liminality as well, through contextual ambiguities that deliberately confuse the spatial, temporal and/or social boundaries (Montola 2009) of the experience. What are the consequences of play that slips in and out of contact with the real?

As I contemplated these aspects of risk, I had two encounters that helped me to connect my thinking with the matchsticks. Each of these encounters touched on a concept with which I was already familiar, and which I was starting to see as relevant to The Parallaxis.

## abracadabra

The first encounter was with the documentation of *Remains Service Management* (2013), a live art performance by Australia-based American artist Loren Kronemyer. In this piece Kronemyer guides participants through a variety of options for disposing of their final remains, 'ranging from the traditional to the ecological to the altruistic to the esoteric' (Kronemyer). Participants are then given an option not disclosed to them at the outset of the performance: to have their 'remains plan' (ibid.) drawn up as a legal document. 'This element adds tension and a twist to the work, where the participant is faced with the potential of generating a binding document within a performance environment,' writes critic Astrid Francis (2013, p. 41), who further reflects on how this tension affected her own participation in the work: 'While the idea of my remains being turned into a diamond or having a burial cairn built in my backyard sounded enticing during the performance, pledging to such a commitment or even a more traditional option was something I couldn't commit to in the moment, which certainly raises the stakes in terms of the participant's investment in the performance' (ibid.).

The risk of consequence in *Remains Service Management*, arising from the tension that Francis describes, can be attributed to the linguistic theory of performativity. Developed by the philosopher J.L. Austin (1955), performativity recognises that some speech acts are constitutive; that is, they enact the very things which they articulate. Austin's examples include the exchange of wedding vows, the christening of a ship, or the making of a bet. 'In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to *describe* my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it,' writes Austin (ibid. p. 6). This theory of performativity can be extended to symbolic acts, such as the signing of a document to create a legal bond — or perhaps the lighting of a match inscribed with certain words. ▲

▼ The idea has also been extended by academic Brad Haseman into a theory of performative research, in which creative practice is a symbolic act that in turn generates symbolic data which 'not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself' (2006, p. 6). As Haseman notes: 'The "practice" in "practice-led research" is primary — it is not an optional extra; it is the necessary pre-condition of engagement in performative research' (ibid.).

Already familiar with the linguistic concept of the performative, I had read Haseman at the outset of my PhD but nonetheless mistook his performativity for that of performance as generally understood within the arts. Or rather, I understood the primacy of process in Haseman's theory, but failed to grasp the constitutive nature of that process. It would be some time yet before I connected the kind of magical operation described by Austin with the research methodology that I had unwittingly begun to pursue. As such I had no sense of any larger significance when I scrawled the following in my sketchbook, as I thought about the matchsticks: *Creating objects and situations that are ostensibly play (or art) but have the transformative power of marriage vows etc. What happens in play is happening for real.*

## things to burn



My second informative encounter was with a query and resulting conversation thread initiated on Facebook by game designer Grant Howitt, creative lead for the UK-based live games company Serious Business. Howitt posed the question, to a community of live gaming enthusiasts: 'Would you cut off a lock of hair as part of playing a game?' (Howitt 2014, pers. comm., 10 January).

Howitt's question illustrates the concept of indexicality, which I had become fascinated with during my early research on pervasive games. Put forward by games scholar Marcus Montola (2009), it refers to a particular quality of mediation between player and play in which 'gameplay allows *doing things for real* during the game' (ibid. p. 20). Montola offers the example of the pervasive game *Killer*, in which players will often sneak up on each other during the course of day-to-day, material reality. In contrast to this kind of indexical action, games and other mediated situations may instead rely on a relationship between player and action that is either symbolic or iconic (ibid.). In symbolic play as demonstrated by a board game, 'you would play a sneaking card to symbolically convey

the act of sneaking,' (ibid.); in the kind of iconic play frequently found in digital games you might 'push the "up" arrow in order to sneak ahead' (ibid.). As Montola notes, with indexical play 'the pleasure of sneaking is in the sneaking itself, not in an elaborate simulation of sneaking' (ibid.).

In response to Howitt's query, a commenter asked whether the cutting of one's hair was meant to test players' willingness to "permanently" change their appearance for the sake of the game, or to give something of themselves. Howitt confirmed the latter, yet either option implies the same level of indexicality — the same sacrificial act of cutting one's hair *for real*. I had sensed this same indexicality in the matchsticks from their first moment of creation, and when I shared them publicly Howitt was one of the first to confirm my own feelings about the work: 'I can't get enough of the idea that these are things that you can burn; that to burn them is, in a way, attention and veneration to the concept' (Howitt 2014 pers. comms., 12 December).

The indexical as theorised by Montola places its emphasis on action: *doing things for real*. Objects are referenced only insofar as they are implicated by these actions. But in nearly all of the comments that I received about the matchsticks the emphasis was inverse. Here the object was foregrounded, its affordances dictating any implied action. As Howitt's creative partner Mary Hamilton succinctly described the set that I had given her: *Things to burn*.

Since it was my intention to continue working with objects for a while, I went looking for more sources to illuminate this material indexicality. I found what I was looking for in the most unlikely of places: a rat. Charles Baudelaire's rat, to be precise.

The connection is not as strange as it may sound, for the 19<sup>th</sup> century French writer was deeply interested not only in urban walking (Coverly 2010) but also in children's play. Of

particular interest to Baudelaire was the question of the real that arises between children and the objects of their play. In the essay *Morale du joujou* (1853, cited in Warner 2009) he writes of the "soul" of the toy, and describes how children 'will turn about their playthings and shake them, hurl them to the ground, and often break them in their bafflement and even rage at their stubborn refusal to awaken into life' (Warner 2009, p. 4).

Baudelaire elaborates on this idea in the poem *Le joujou du pauvre* (1862, cited in Warner 2009), which tells of an encounter between a rich child and a poor child who stand on either side of mansion gates. Behind bars the rich child clutches an expensive doll, 'as fresh as its master, varnished, gilded, clothed in a purple dress and covered with plumes and glitter' (Baudelaire in Warner 2009, p. 4). But the princeling loses all interest in his fancy doll when the street urchin lifts up a small cage to display his own plaything: a breathing, twitching rat, 'drawn from life itself' (ibid.).

*Drawn from life itself.* Perhaps this observation said no more about the real in play than Montola's indexicality, but in separating object from action it also seemed to isolate a certain quality. Not perhaps that of consciousness or the ability to draw breath, but something nonetheless suggestive of the animate. ▲

▼ Here I first began to conceive of a distinction that would eventually inform the essence of the game. This distinction was between the inert toy as constructed by Winnicott's (1971) transitional object, and the animate counterpart as suggested by Abram's (1997) ecology of magic. The theoretical aspect of this framing is partly retrospective, as I was yet to realise Abram's relevance to the project. But the juxtaposition between doll and rat in Baudelaire's poem shifted my engagement with Winnicott, directing my attention beyond the liminality of his key theory to its equally



essential subjectivity. I saw that transitional space was not only a holding ground between inner and outer worlds, but was more specifically a space defined by 'the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects' (Winnicott 1971, p. 47). While Winnicott asserts this imagined control to be 'the precariousness of magic itself' (ibid.), I now began to question whether magic must always be such a wholly subjective affair.

## this could be a game

These two concepts taken together, performativity and indexicality, pose a series of related questions: What does it mean to do something that is "not real" or symbolic within a situation that is otherwise designated as real? What does it mean to do something "real" within a situation that is ostensibly not real? Does one constitute a not-real-but-real; the other a real-but-not-real? Why is the former generally considered to be more real than the latter? And what happens when ambiguity is introduced into either or both sides of the equation, forcing us to confront this question of the real?

Based on my observations thus far, the magic that I sought was to be found not in an insistence that the ambiguous or real-but-not-real be accepted as certain, but in allowing this uncertainty to be equally real. For the unknown seems to be a more powerful state than the known; questions more transformative than answers. Researchers who have studied ambiguity have observed similarly.

'By thwarting easy interpretation, ambiguous situations require people to participate in making meaning,' writes interaction designer William Gaver (Gaver, Beaver & Benford 2003, pp. 235-234). 'This can involve the integration of previously disconnected discourses, the projection of meaning onto an unspecified situation, or the resolution of an ethical dilemma. In each case, the artefact or situation sets the scene for meaning-making, but doesn't prescribe the result. Instead, the work of making an ambiguous situation comprehensible belongs to the person, and this can be both inherently pleasurable and lead to a deep conceptual appropriation of the artefact' or situation.

Grappling with ambiguity in non-critical situations may indeed be a rewarding experience, but it appears to be a pleasure that not many of us take to naturally. In their own study of ambiguity, the psychologists Ellen Langer and Alison Piper point to previous research that demonstrates 'how quickly people come to view the world in a limited and rigid fashion'

(1987, p. 280). A primary mechanism of this rigidity is what the authors refer to as mindlessness: a tendency to assign the objects of our perception to categories of varying exactitude, and to see in these specific objects only the more general attributes and possibilities of their category. 'According to this definition, one deals with information as though it has a single meaning and is available for use in only that way,' the authors write. 'This results in a lack of attention to details.' In light of this tendency of human cognition, the authors ask: 'Is there a way to come to understand the world that does not simultaneously set the stage for limited use of that knowledge?' (ibid.).

Attempting to answer their own question, Langer and Piper conducted a series of experiments in which participants were presented with an open-ended problem that was not disclosed to be part of the study. Within the context of the experiment's purported (but irrelevant) objective, participants were also presented with a collection of objects. These objects were either familiar (a pen, a rubber band) or unfamiliar (a fragment of a dog's chew toy), and were introduced in a manner that was either conditional (this *could be* an X) or unconditional (this *is* an X) (ibid.). An "unexpected" situation was then introduced, which could be creatively resolved with at least one of the introduced items. Participants most frequently "solved" the problem by identifying the potential of an unfamiliar object that had been conditionally introduced, leading the authors to conclude that mindlessness can be prevented through a 'conditional understanding of the world' (ibid.).

This conditional understanding is eloquently articulated by Tassos Stevens, director of UK-based immersive theatre company Coney. 'What if. What is. We're playful when we hold two spheres of belief in our brains overlapping,' Stevens writes. 'The distance between these two spheres of what if and what is, it's a dynamic space, sparking like the electrical storm of Van der Graaf. Sometimes so close the spheres are almost touching, sometimes miles apart, but the meaning of play is found across that distance. Still what if

is only charged if it is grounded and connected to what is. There's no chance of transformation otherwise' (2013, para 5).

It is this tension between the real and the possible; the dynamic space between these spheres, that energises both the performative and the indexical. What is. What if.

nothing was lost when everything was given away \*



I thought that I had come to understand the magic of the matchsticks through this phase of reflection and research. But when I attempted to apply my understanding to a new phase of making I found that I could not work in such a straightforward way.

I began by ransacking the shelves of my workshop anew, this time with a clearer sense of purpose. I was looking for objects that possessed a certain spark; an affordance that was *drawn from life itself*. But my menagerie remained lifeless, as mute as the smiley faces has once been. Maybe I just needed different objects?

Over the next few months I filled my sketchbook with ideas — lists of objects, metaphors — which unsurprisingly failed to become anything larger than themselves. Perhaps the objects needed systems? I found myself reverting to my spatial thinking, as I tried to

design playful distribution networks for these artefacts that didn't yet exist. But without objects to animate the systems, they too remained inert.

I felt completely stuck. I was tempted to return to research mode, but now my attention was needed elsewhere. I had to pack up for another move — the last one for a long time, I hoped.

My new place was a bright, open-plan apartment on the fifth floor of large building, with sweeping views of my inner-city suburb and the rolling hills beyond. The sky was immense. And after nearly a year of living with friends, the solitude was delicious.

Maybe it was the solitude; maybe it was the sky. Maybe it was the Zen Buddhist ideas I had been researching, after an improbable encounter with experimental music composer John Cage in a book about poetic cartography (Wood 2010). Or maybe it was the simple act of writing to my friend Tassos about being stuck. To which he replied: 'Try putting the stuck-close-to-inspired moment into a question of less than 100 words, and we can see what response of less than 100 it might dislodge from the brain' (Stevens 2014, pers. comm., 6 July).

Concise, precise — exactly what was needed. Grateful for the prompt, I tried to answer it. I filled several pages of my sketchbook with inconclusive ramblings. Finally, and rather glumly, I gave up.

The next morning when I woke, before I even rose from bed, I reached for my sketchbook and scrawled: *THEY'RE KOANS*.

Only now, as I re-read Tassos' email, do I notice that he never specified whose brain might be prompted to dislodge me from my impasse. ▲

▼ The koan is a teaching tool in Zen Buddhism. It is a paradox or riddle that cannot be “solved” with rational thought, but rather must be dissolved by a deeper, more intuitive way of thinking. Contemplating a koan forces one to let go of the intellect, which Zen scholar DT Suzuki identifies as 'the worst enemy of Zen experience' (1956, p. 136) because it insists on 'discriminating subject from object' (ibid.).

'On examination we at once notice that there is no room in the koan to insert an intellectual interpretation,' Suzuki writes. 'The knife is not sharp enough to cut the koan open and see what are its contents. For a koan is not a logical proposition but the expression of a certain mental state resulting from the Zen discipline' (ibid. p. 137).

The purpose of koan practice, and all Zen practice, is to realise the state of *satori*, which Suzuki defines as 'an intuitive looking into the nature of things in contradistinction to the analytical or logical understanding of it' (ibid. p. 84).

'Practically, it means the unfolding of a new world hitherto unperceived in the confusion of a dualistically-trained mind' Suzuki writes (ibid.). 'Or we may say that with *satori* our entire surroundings are viewed from quite an unexpected angle of perception. Whatever this is, the world for those who have gained a *satori* is no more the old world as it used to be; even with all its flowing streams and burning fires, it is never the same one again. Logically stated, all its opposites and contradictions are united and harmonized into a consistent organic whole. This is a mystery and a miracle, but according to the Zen masters such is being performed every day. *Satori* can thus be had only through our once personally experiencing it.'

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\* (Cage 1958)

## seeing and not seeing

This flash of insight had illuminated the connection between my initial idea of the matchsticks as Zen-like challenges and my thoughts about performativity and indexicality that followed. Realising this connection led me to think of the new artefacts that I was seeking to create as "playable koans" — toy-like objects with some vital element of realness that could enable moments of *satori*. ▲

▼ During my most recent phase of frustrated sketching I had also been reading about Fluxus, the avant garde art movement of the 1960s and 70s that embraced playfully Zen methods as a means 'to deflect us back to a starting point — to the world itself with all of its vagueness, dislocations, and potentialities' (Smith 2011, p. 119). While Fluxus is perhaps best known for its conceptual "scores" or instruction pieces that detail a series of actions to be undertaken, there is also an emphasis on objects in the Fluxus oeuvre. Most notable are the assemblages known as FluxKits and FluxGames, which share with the more dematerialised instruction pieces an interest in process that can be described as performative. Games scholar Celia Pearce alludes to the performativity of these works when she notes: 'The FluxKits and FluxGames that emerged out of the 60's and 70's were beautiful readymade objects, but their object-ness represents a state of dormant play. Just as a chess board is a beautiful object, its true value is in its potential energy, which is actuated when the game is played. It is in the playing that a chess board comes alive, and the game object becomes a catalyst for play' (2010, p. 17).

As Pearce notes, the FluxKits and FluxGames were readymades, comprised of everyday materials like the matchsticks and other sundries I had been collecting. (In fact Ben Vautier's 1968 piece *Total Art Matchbox* is an altered box of matches.)



Fluxus artists employed these familiar objects for deliberately political ends, 'to make statements not only about the media themselves, but also about the larger context of society, power and control in which they are embedded' (ibid. p. 10). But the marbles and dice and dried beans in these works also convey an indexicality; an invitation to do something *for real*. And yet the political agenda of Fluxus frequently steps in to stymie the doing of anything: a common trope in Fluxus works is 'the unplayable game, a kind of high concept game that makes a larger statement by exposing the broken systems that it represents' (ibid. p. 11).

Although Fluxus was not a conscious point of reference in my epiphany of the playable koans, it undoubtedly influenced my thinking. In hindsight I can say that I was most affected by the aspects of Fluxus that didn't resonate with my vision for The Parallaxis — specifically the idea of the unplayable or the strictly conceptual. In my resistance to this idea I found my own research interests further emphasised: the open rather than the closed; the possible rather than the impossible.

With refreshed enthusiasm I unpacked my inventory of objects and set up my studio. The items that seemed to have the most potential went on my work table, where I would contemplate them while trying to avoid thinking too hard about their possibilities. It was a sort of sideways focus, hoping to catch glints of inspiration out of the corner of my eye. I began moving things around, this next to that. Dice and pill boxes; balloons and dressmaker pins. Some objects flickered and then fell silent: darts, dominoes, poker chips. Others continued to gleam with possibility: magnets, marbles, a dollar coin. In fits and starts, a body of work came together. But none of the ideas came as freely as the matchsticks, and none resulted in an artefact so elegant. I was still missing something.

## inside out



Although I wasn't thrilled with the work that I was producing during this phase, I found the quiet, meditative tinkering to be quite enjoyable. The matchsticks had sparked to life in the hushed heat of mid-summer; now I settled into the stillness of deep winter. The world reduced; I was turning inward.

At first I didn't realise this. Gradually though, I became aware. These koans that I was trying to produce, these Zen toys — they weren't really suggesting anything profound. They were at turns too obvious or too oblique. But as I worked, I continued with my

now-established practice of making notes about the process. And in these moments of observation and reflection I began to see what my tinker toys were actually suggesting. Even more so than the matchsticks, the meaning of these artefacts was in their making — the end results were almost entirely irrelevant. And the message here was not merely one of process as a form of practice, but spoke more directly to the relationship between practice and practitioner.

To fully grasp the meaning of this message has required two years of evolution in both the project and my thinking. To begin here, at the beginning: First I saw the metaphors. My inner world was speaking through these objects, and the ways in which I toyed with them.

*I'm captivated by the magnets; by the repelling force they generate when the matching poles are pushed together. Inanimate yet so very animate — like an invisible life force. And how one will inevitably flip if they're pushed too close together. It becomes a game of polarities and proximities, working with this force.*

And then several days later:

*Magnets, M——*

M—— being my new(ish) love, and the magnets being a clear parallel to the forceful oscillations of our relationship thus far.

The correspondences continued: with the spinning tops as I whirled my way through several months of personal and professional chaos; with the rolling marbles seeking stillness as I began to feel like I was losing mine.

Finally:

*I see it. Before I can go any deeper into this project, I'm having to go deeper into my own life. I've felt brittle and anxious for so many years now — since moving to Australia, really. I haven't had a lucid dream since Manchester, or even a particularly vivid one.*

It was true. The year I'd spent in Manchester doing my MA had been nearly psychedelic in its singular intensity. At times I almost felt as if I might be going mad, so unhinged from all previous constraints had I become. Creativity permeated every aspect of experience; the world was rife with messages and meaning. Even then I knew it wouldn't last. I assumed that I would find an equilibrium, though — a way of working with this magic that was more sustainable. I never thought that it would disappear completely.

But it did, blotted out by the harsh glare of a reality that I did not anticipate when I rather impulsively moved to Australia. And I could see now that the game would go no further without this essential magic. If I wanted to play with ambiguity and uncertainty, I first had to rediscover how to play.

## hexagrams in everything

Summer had arrived again by the time I reached this understanding. I was still reading at the intersection of Zen philosophy and art, and one day I came across an arresting comment by Buddhist poet Chase Twichell: 'I find the internal pressure exerted by emotion and by a koan to be similar in surprising and unpredictable ways' (Twichell & Whitney 2003, para 5).

*Satori* finally bloomed: the tinker toys *were* koans. Not the artefacts I had produced, but the act of working through them in a meditative state. By permitting my mind to wander and relax I had indeed allowed awareness to steal in from the periphery. ▲

▼ This "peripheral" thinking has become a key strategy in my creative and critical practice, allowing me to become unstuck by altering the angle of my focus on a particular problem. The Australian artist and academic Graeme Sullivan discusses the research that supports this approach: 'Recent studies in cognitive neuroscience offer tantalising evidence that 'insight' is a consequence of precisely the opposite approach to the thinking advocated by the clinical model of inquiry that promotes progressive focusing, the elimination of confounding variables and distractions and exercising control ... The implication is that creative options and new associations occur in situations where there is intense concentration, but within an open landscape of free-range possibility rather than a closed geography of well-trodden pathways' (2009, p. 48).

Several weeks later I encountered the concept of *genjōkōan*, which had even larger implications for the project. A teaching of the 13th century Japanese Zen master Dōgen, *genjōkōan* is in fact two lessons folded into one. Most frequently translated as 'actualizing

the fundamental point' (Leighton 2004, p. 43), *genjōkōan* maintains first that the path to enlightenment is the experience of enlightenment, and second that 'to study the buddha way is to study the self' (ibid.). Zen roshi Norman Fischer describes *genjōkōan* as 'the koan that manifests in this moment' (2014, para. 2); an ongoing meditative practice of recognising universal meaning in the individual circumstances of our lives.

I had recently been reading *The Way of Zen* by Alan Watts (1957), and this interpretation of *genjōkōan* reminded me of Watts' assertion that an expert in the I Ching 'can "see" a hexagram in anything — in the chance arrangement of a bowl of flowers, in objects scattered upon a table, in the natural markings on a pebble' (ibid. p. 42). *Genjōkōan* also seemed to be present in an observation made by Buddhist nun Pema Chodron: that in living mindfully 'you begin to realize that you're always standing in the middle of a sacred circle, and that's your whole life ... Whatever comes into the space is there to teach you' (2010 p. 45).

Taken together, these ideas reinforced my framework of a process-oriented methodology. For the first aspect of *genjōkōan* is a Zen Buddhist expression of performativity; the second aspect, an expression of reflexivity. While I did not see these correlations quite so clearly at the time, I did intuit the correspondence. *Genjōkōan* spoke to my own evolving constellation of ideas about the self and its capacity to make meaning in relation with the world, and fortified my nascent understanding that personal experience could be a vehicle for more universal insights.

## outside in

Parallel to this encounter with *genjōkōan*, my readings had led me deeper into another important Buddhist concept of the self: its seeming opposite, the no-self. Here the relationship to my emerging framework was more than my own making. For with no-self I had stumbled into the discipline of East-West comparative psychology, which draws heavily on the ideas of Winnicott and his contemporary Carl Jung.

'The self that Buddhism finds to be unreal is remarkably similar to the "false self" of Winnicott's psychology,' writes psychotherapist Mark Epstein. 'In Buddhist meditation, the dismantling of this false self is encouraged through the deliberate meditative cultivation of unintegration ... Once comfortable in a state of unintegration, Buddhist psychology contends, we can begin to see clearly how compulsively we cling to the various images of self that present themselves in our minds' (2006, p. 313).

Epstein continues: 'The more comfortable we become in permitting a state of unintegration, the more bits and pieces of self we become aware of. Awareness fulfils its holding function by becoming the swollen and empty container within which the entire process unfolds. Eventually, the still, silent center that Winnicott called *incommunicado* begins to speak' (ibid. p. 315).

Winnicott indeed saw a relationship between meditation and our innermost form of communication with our "real" self. 'In thinking of the psychology of mysticism, it is usual to concentrate on the understanding of the mystic's withdrawal into a personal inner world of sophisticated introjects,' he wrote. 'Perhaps not enough attention has been paid to the mystic's retreat to a position in which he can communicate secretly with subjective objects and phenomena, the loss of contact with the world of shared reality being counterbalanced by a gain in terms of feeling real' (1965, pp. 185-186).

I was excited by the discovery of this connection between two major theoretical strands that had been manifesting in the project, but in hindsight I was perhaps too excited to properly reflect on what the link was telling me about my own process. I recognised the bridge and happily installed it in my framework, but I didn't stop to actually cross over.

What I saw from the far side of the bridge was simply that I needed to achieve unintegration in order to get past this autobiographical phase of the game. If I could sweep up all the bits of self that had fractured during my years of living in Australia, I could tip those fragments into the bin and start anew with the blank slate of no-self. Then I would be able to make work that evoked a more universal resonance, and the game could really begin.

This reading of unintegration became inscribed into my narrative when I encountered what is perhaps the most well-known aphorism in the field of Buddhist psychology: 'You have to be somebody before you can be nobody' (Engler 1986, p. 34). The syntax implies a clear goal, a linear progression. Tellingly, Engler (2003) would later revise his thoughts to reflect a more synchronous relationship; an ability to maintain a sense of self while also recognising that the self is process rather than object (Crouch 2011). But at the time I saw unintegration merely as a phase I needed to get through in order to evolve the project, and *genjōkōan* as a framework to legitimise this inner work.



## traversal

Throughout the writing of this dissertation, the process of redrafting has led to significant new insights. Sometimes this begins with the unpicking of a single awkward sentence, other times I read entire sections with the sinking feeling that a sledgehammer is the only way through. When wholesale destruction is implied I always pause, as hesitant to revise history as I am eager to enhance the story with my new understanding. For I am aware that my chosen approach to delivering this narrative is akin to high school maths: show your work. And so I have attempted to do just this, while still editing for clarity of thought and a coherent progression of ideas. This is why I have made such a laboured journey of arriving at what follows: my unified theory of the tinker toys.

Only eight months away from submitting, I swung my sledgehammer at this chapter's entire second half — and found something glinting in the rubble. It was, most unexpectedly, the answer to my koan. It looked like a small child lost in play. She spoke only to herself, as she tinkered with her playthings. As this inner dialogue grew louder, she grew less brittle and transparent. She was becoming real again.

I cried when I first saw her. I cried again while writing these words. I would exclude such a confession, but for this: to make a game that's real, I have to be real too. Here lies the answer to my koan. Risk as method; reflexivity, performativity, process. No mere academic buzzwords, but signs pointing the way. A riddle challenging me to dissolve the subject-object divide. Researcher, researched: the nature of my inquiry was requiring me to be both. And I had to do more than just remember how to play — I had to play for real. For 'what if is only charged if it is grounded and connected to what is. There's no chance of transformation otherwise' (Stevens 2013, para 5).

## intermezzo



It's just before midnight on the summer solstice of 2014 and I am setting out to walk home from a Christmas party at a friend's house. Goodbyes, hugs, a kiss on the cheek that misses its mark and finds an ear instead. The lanterns in the backyard glow softly on the picnic blankets; the windows of the house are squares of gold. I make my way up the driveway to the street, and I am alone.

The walk is long — nearly two hours. There's a big hill to climb, right at the beginning, that feels like it goes on forever. I know this when I choose the walk over the expensive taxi ride. It's been a long time since I've had a long walk; it's been even longer since I've walked at night. I reckon I have precisely the right amount of wine in my veins to enjoy the trip.

After a few minutes I reach the main road, and the ascent begins. I walk neither fast nor slow, but lean slightly into the hill as I climb. I fill my lungs and empty them again, enjoying the rhythm that we fall into — my body and I. My legs feel strong.

Cars pass, moving easily up the long slope and disappearing beyond its crest. An old hatchback slows and its driver calls out: *Need a ride?* I wave him on.

Eventually the traffic dies to nothing and it's just me and the hill, breathing in, breathing out, and then inevitably the hill finds its peak and it's just me. There is no descent — I've climbed out of a valley onto a long flat plain that stretches all the way to home. It's the same valley I moved into nearly two years ago; that blank neighbourhood with the sad shopping trolleys and the concrete creek that offered me the best solace that it could. I'm glad my friends live on the side of the hill rather than in my old neighbourhood at the bottom, and not just for the extra climbing that it's spared me.

I keep walking, my breath beginning to slow. The moon is dark and the world is bathed in starlight. I'm giddy with pinot gris and oxygen, and occasionally I get flashes of a wonderful weirdness that over the years I've come to call *this is new*. Not a newness of place, but rather of perception. It's a feeling of disassociation from everything known; a shiver or a wash of unanchored awareness. When I get home I attempt to sketch a portrait of my fleeting subject, before it dissolves into the oncoming tide of sleep.

*It goes beyond the warm liquid light of synchronicity, where everything is soft and open, floaty and free, yet utterly present. This is more like ageless moonlight on an alien planet — alone in a void, silence like a flawless mirror. In a known environment, everything is strange. In a strange environment, everything is known. But known for exactly what it is, in all its lucid strangeness. And the strangeness of the known comes with equal clarity — not a cipher, but a revelation.*

I'm not home yet, though. I have yet to write those words, or these. Right now I'm still walking in the cold clear starlight, my feet comfortable in my shoes, my breath easy in my lungs. The world feels like a dream, and yet I am unmistakably awake.

This is new, this is new.

I walk.

part three



## so many circles

*We create so many circles on this straight line we're told we're traveling. The truth is of course is that there is no journey. We are arriving and departing all at the same time.*

— *David Bowie (2002)*

There's a missing link in this chain of events, that I've just now rediscovered while going through the oldest of my notes. An evolution of the project that only ever existed on paper, but which nonetheless influenced the shape of the game.

It's tempting to rewrite history and slot this evolution into the first part of the narrative where it chronologically belongs, but that would be missing the point. For the link has been there all along, guiding me to where I am now; to where we're going next. But it seems that I had to forget it to get to it, or to let it get to me.

So. After the creek walks. Before the smiley faces. Still in death valley, but slowly disappearing my life back into moving boxes. Bitterly cold, bronchitis. Incapable of anything but the deductive way of working that I had been trying for months to leave behind. Somewhere in the midst of packing and sleeping and shivering feverishly I came up with an elaborate new version of the game. The game that I had not yet walked my way out of trying to create, and that I had not yet walked my way into creating.

The particulars are overcooked and irrelevant. To summarise, the intent was to lead players deep into the city's labyrinthine network of laneways, guided by a series of questions that would appear briefly in various windows. I hoped this quest would open players' eyes to unnoticed aspects of the city; that it would help them to step sideways into subtlety and shadow.

It was a quest that was never to be undertaken, at least not by its intended audience nor in its envisaged form. But the act of imagining this journey turned out to be valuable just the same; a hint of the process-based understandings that were to come. And in the end, it was indeed the questions and the windows that led the way.

### questions

In developing this phase I went through a lengthy process of compiling and refining a set of questions to display in the windows. The questions were loosely inspired by the themes of the Tarot and were developed using a multitude of sources, including several card games geared toward storytelling and facilitating conversations. Looking now at the questions that made the cut, and more importantly at my notes on the development process, I can almost see the ghostly traces of a blueprint hovering behind the words.

First, the connection to the matchsticks is clear. Questions that probe the inner life of emotion and imagination. Questions that prompt reflection on personal history. Whispers of hope and regret; hints of shadowy magic. In my memory the matchsticks had sparked to life fully formed, and in a sense they did. Yet that spark was also a seed unfurling.

Second, the questions gesture even further into the future, to the concept of *genjōkōan* that I was still a year and a half from discovering. My notes from the selection process contemplate certain ideas that begin to approach the Buddhist teaching:

*It's about finding the universal in the personal, and vice versa. We are all living the human experience, which can be lonely and frightening at times. It helps to be reminded that we're in it together. And also to remember that each of us is unique — which is exciting. Fractals and prisms; [little mirrors one and all](#).*

## windows

Little mirrors, little windows. Although my thirst for the real made me wary of working with metaphors, they would continue to arise nonetheless. This was the first to make itself known, and in hindsight perhaps the most significant. ▲

▼ The writer Kay Larson (2012) brushes up against the paradoxical relationship between the metaphorical and the real in her reflections on Bruce Nauman's video work *Mapping the Studio I (Fat Chance John Cage)*, in which Nauman leaves a video camera running overnight to determine why the mice in his studio have thus far escaped the cat. In her musings, Larson obliquely suggests a synergy between apparent opposites.

'In the studio, things happen by chance,' she writes. 'A mouse runs by. A moth flutters through space. These "chance events" are random and filled with non-intention — the buzz of small creatures, caught on film, in the midst of their busy and eventful lives ... By watching through the neutral eye of the camera, we are able to see what we might not glimpse otherwise: that a "silent" space is an invisible game of billiards played by beings, each at its own center, each responding to all other beings ... There are absolutely no metaphors, just observations' (ibid. p. 709).

Yet even as Larson asserts an objective truth to these events, she also assigns them a subjective symbolism:

'The artist maps reality,' Larson writes. 'That's the cat-and-mouse game between the artist and the world. And it's not just the artist who plays it. Each of us is in a cat-and-mouse game with our perceptual life. Do we really see ourselves? Or do we see only what obtrudes in daylight? Do we crash through our nightlife, scattering the



subtle things that abide there? Or do we simply watch without judgment, in the expectation of learning something?' (ibid. p. 710).

Although Larson seems to contradict herself with these two passages, drawing metaphor from her initial observation, the metaphor itself gets to the core of the paradox. For it is exactly what *genjōkōan* describes: the ability to see a moment for what it is, while at the same time reflecting on the larger truths it might reveal. As Norman Fischer writes, 'This seems to be the whole trick of zen practice — to stay with your actual experience, your own personal story, and yet to see through it at the same time to something more' (2014, para. 1).

Larson was a practicing Zen Buddhist for more than a decade, so it seems likely that her writing is informed by *genjōkōan* or related concepts. Indeed, the above passages come from her book *Where the Heart Beats: John Cage, Zen Buddhism, and the Inner Life of Artists* — which concludes with its own contemplation of understandings left unspoken:

'And where in Nauman's cat-and-mouse game is Cage, or Buddhism, or non-intention, or process, or any of the trappings of one man's path?' she asks. 'The teachings merge with the world. Not a trace remains' (2012, p. 711).

*From the beginning I've been thinking about doors. They're so obvious: [Narnia](#), [Neverwhere](#), [Exit](#), etc.*

*But it's windows. Windows are what I'm after.*

*You step through a door into a new space, and by definition you leave the previous space behind. You cannot be on both sides of a door at the same time. You can linger in a doorway, long goodbyes — but eventually you must choose a side. Doors, liminal as they may be, are meant for closing as readily as they are for opening.*

*But a window is an interface. It sees both sides at once; both sides see each other.*

*The window also frames a scene. For it is not just an opening, but the limits of this opening, that defines a window. It is what you cannot see, as well as what you can.*

## on this straight line

Summer is no time to be stuck inside. While I was yet to fully grasp the meaning of the tinker toys, I nonetheless realised that this phase of working had reached its end. My notes began to sing a childlike refrain: *I want to go out and play!*

Specifically, I wanted to go out and play my subtle city game. I was tired of the studio; I was tired of my sketchbook; I was tired of the game design work that I had been doing outside of my PhD. I was tired of games and design in general. I was also tired of worrying about logistics and budgets and ethics approval every time an idea began to coalesce.

My notes from this time reveal a fundamental shift in thinking about the project. I discovered that I wanted to make a game *with* rather than *for* these other players that I had only hazily envisaged. I wanted to stop worrying constantly about *what next* and instead follow the moment. Most of all, I wanted to be surprised: by the game, and also by myself.

## arriving and departing all at the same time

I knew that I should keep things simple with this next evolution of the game, to allow free range in any possible direction. But I also knew that I would have to begin from somewhere. So I went back to basics: I would start with walking. This addressed my impatience to get back out into the world, and it answered a deeper need as well — a need that other ways of moving through the world did not fulfil. In fact it was the same need that was compelling me to make this game.

For as I had first discovered during my first crisis of early adulthood (and would continue to forget and rediscover through the years), it is possible to walk one's way into the liminal. The creek haunts, the badge drifts, the starlight of the solstice. There is a certain kind of magic to a certain kind of walking. This magic is referenced by the psychogeography of the Situationists and the Surrealists, and by many other writers, artists and thinkers throughout history (Basho 2000; Coverly 2012; O'Rourke 2016; Smith & Persighetti 2012; Solnit 2001; Thoreau 1862). Two writers in particular have bracketed this project, with reflections on the liminality of walking that have influenced or illuminated my own thinking.

As the first winter of my candidature closed in I had turned from wandering to reading, and found in the work of landscape historian John R. Stilgoe echoes of that graffitied, concreted creek that had kept me company through autumn. 'The whole concatenation of wild and artificial things, the natural ecosystem as modified by people over the centuries, the built environment layered over layers, the eerie mix of sounds and smells and glimpses neither natural nor crafted — all of it is free for the taking, for the taking in,' writes Stilgoe. 'Take it, take it in, take in more every weekend, every day, and quickly it becomes the theater that intrigues, relaxes, fascinates, seduces, and above all expands any mind focused on it. Outside lies utterly ordinary space open to any casual explorer

willing to find the extraordinary. Outside lies unprogrammed awareness that at times becomes directed serendipity. Outside lies magic' (1998, p. 2).

The notion of directed serendipity greatly influenced my labyrinthine idea of windows and questions, in which I attempted to construct a minimalist frame for walking deeper into awareness of the subtle city. Stilgoe acknowledges this curious place that is hiding in plain sight, and suggests that walking offers 'unique entry' (ibid. p. 10) into the exploration of its nuances:

'Landscape, the built environment, ordinary space that surrounds the adult explorer, is something not meant to be interpreted, to be read, to be understood. It is neither a museum gallery nor a television show. Unlike almost everything else to which adults turn their attention, the concatenation of natural and built form surrounding the explorer is fundamentally mysterious and often maddeningly complex. Exploring it first awakens the dormant resiliency of youth, the easy willingness to admit to making a wrong turn and going back a block, the comfortable understanding that some explorations take more than an afternoon, the certain knowledge that lots of things in the wide world just down the street make no immediate sense' (ibid. pp. 10-11).

*And as I pedalled deeper into the woods, there came the glint of something strange.*

Winter is for reading, so it seems. Two years later I escaped the cold to celebrate my 40th birthday in the tropics, and I brought a novel with me. It was a break from all things PhD. By the time I finished reading I had found a new favourite author, in British writer of speculative fiction Graham Joyce. This was the second of his books that I had read, each inhabiting the liminal with a strangeness that was utterly unique. When I returned to Melbourne I researched Joyce, intrigued by the imagination that had brought these worlds to life. He had died of cancer 11 months before. I was heartbroken; I felt as if I had lost a

friend. This feeling was amplified when I discovered his blog, aptly titled *Readers Are Not Strangers*, which he maintained even through his year-long battle with lymphoma.

Joyce's blog posts struck a familiar chord: here was a kindred spirit who also saw the wondrous in the everyday. In a post written less than six months before his death, Joyce ruminated at length on the importance of walking to his magical world view.

'It's the way in which Nature can transmute into symbol or take on the luminosity of dreaming that I'm referring to. Walking for any distance becomes a kind of a meditation. After twenty minutes of changed breathing and repetitive movement the rhythms of the brain change. Alpha waves start to take over from the beta waves of general alertness ...

And when that happens a heron flies up ... Or a kingfisher moves like an electric pulse along the length of the canal.

... The heron or the kingfisher, of course, are there whether you are present or not. They haven't mysteriously appeared just because you have some figuring out to do. But the act of figuring them out has made you notice them in quite a different way to that which you would have done in a non-meditative state of mind. By walking without a specific destination or purpose, by walking at leisure, you have walked yourself into a corridor that exists somewhere between waking and dreaming. In that corridor the feathers of the kingfisher are a more vibrant blue, and the kingfisher himself has a more vivid meaning.

... Without you even knowing about it, the alpha waves have generated the rainbow bridge between your conscious creative mind and your unconscious creative mind' (Joyce 2014 paras. 10-17). ▲

▼ The Australian artist Lesley Duxbury also talks about walking as a meditative practice that is able to create resonance between different realms of experiencing. 'The rhythm of the act of walking over extended days generates a kind of rhythm of thinking,' Duxbury writes, 'and the traverse through a landscape echoes or stimulates a series of thoughts, which in turn creates an odd consonance between my internalised and externalised worlds' (2011, p. 39).

I met Joyce through his work but outside the bounds of mine, and yet it seemed that outside the bounds was most often where this game was being played. The creek walks, the synchronicities and shadows of the badge drifts, that first matchstick, a long walk home under a new moon.

*Without you even knowing about it ...*

## betwixt

Walking was clearly essential to the game; my prolonged failure to realise this was almost painfully absurd. And yet the elegant simplicity of walking didn't feel like quite enough. The frame needed to be slightly more visible, to delimit the experience and allow me to perceive its movements. I thought of a remark by composer John Cage that I had recently read: 'life without structure is unseen' (Cage in Iverson 2010, p. 15).

*For it is not just an opening, but the limits of this opening, that defines a window.*

Cage's philosophy of art as a framing device for noticing the everyday spoke to my interest in the ambiguity of the real, and would become an essential point of reference as the project continued to evolve. But of course some windows reveal more than others, as Cage was well aware. In his *Lecture on Nothing* (1959) I would later discover the entirety of his above remark: 'Structure without life is dead, but life without structure is unseen.'

Here is perhaps the most concise expression of Cage's project, which has been fundamental to the evolution of my own. In devising experimental music scores for others to perform, Cage continually sought the perfect balance between determined and indeterminate. 'If the schema is too loose, the musician has too much freedom and the imagination is not sufficiently engaged,' writes musicologist Austin Clarkson of Cage's methodology. 'If the schema is too tightly controlled, the response is not spontaneous enough, and the musical imagination has too little scope' (2001, p. 98). But a schema with precisely the right amount of tension affords access to 'the liminal zone between the conscious and the unconscious' (ibid. p. 94), which Clarkson aligns with Winnicott's transitional space of creativity and play. In this space 'opposites conjoin and paradox is at home. It is where we experience nonobstruction and interpenetration, and purposeful purposelessness. We should expect that here, too, the competing claims between the individual and the social will be reconciled' (ibid. p. 201).



The individual and the social, the personal and the universal, the known and the unknown. The windows with their leading questions had become a funnel into a narrow passage by the time I abandoned that restrictive schema. But the badges and their cryptic tags were too anarchic in response; too confoundingly ambiguous to render anything more visible, except to me. With the matchsticks I had found that magic middle, *life itself* made present by the framework of its cage. But what about the life that was to be found outside the studio? What kind of structure could reveal the subtle city as it had appeared when I didn't think that I was playing this game?

## fat chance

I began to wonder if perhaps my biggest obstacle was the game itself. Maybe the intricate ephemerality of a city could not be anticipated, no less manipulated, without a loss of resonance. Or perhaps my problem was not one of structure, but rather one of artifice. Here Cage's words were doubly instructive, for in both the framing and the framed his emphasis was equal: the essential element was life. The everyday, the here and now, and the 'search to find a language or form that can adequately convey its complexity, ambiguity and elusiveness' (Johnstone 2008, p. 16). This had been my intention and my interest all along, to collaborate with the found city. But artifice had crept into my schemas: the questions and the badges were both fabrication, interruption. As installations they made no gesture of recognition or reply toward the world in which they were inserted. In this sense they were as clumsy as an overt fiction that attempted to appropriate the real in order to enhance its own allure.

It may be that artifice is fundamental to the definition of a game, even one created for playing on the game board of the ambiguous city. Media scholar Hugh Davies implies as much; while advocating for a minimalist approach to the design of pervasive games, he nonetheless foregrounds the constructed nature of the experience:

'[S]pace is already rich with content, embedded with objects, beings, memories and nostalgia waiting for us to ascribe meaning to and thus redefine it as place,' Davies observes. 'Designers need only contribute small additions that tie seamlessly into the real world to appropriate an entire area as being of their own design ... Indeed, in order for players to form real and lasting relationships with city spaces, not game exclusive ones, it is important for game designers to minimise the artifice of the Pervasive Game spaces' (Davies 2007, p. 3).

Yet if artifice is inherent to the concept of a game, so too is a counterbalancing mechanism: chance. In many games this mechanism is a closed system: roll the dice, shuffle the cards, flip the coin. Possibility exists only within these predetermined bounds. But games and other playful encounters that situate themselves within the everyday; within the complex, ambiguous, elusive city — these projects tend to draw on the indeterminacy of *life itself*. Art historian Owen Smith reflects on the close relationship between chance and the everyday among what he terms the 'amodernist' artists of the 1950s and 1960s, chief among them John Cage. 'The recognition of indeterminacy as a prevailing principle of nature, as well as a central aspect of the creative process, reinforced the attitude that the world is based on ambiguities, ruptures, and incongruities,' Smith writes. 'The use of chance ... is important beyond its use as an artistic technique (chance as a means to produce some end). Rather, it reflected a recognition of the fluid and shifting nature of the world ...' (2011, pp. 122-124). Or to return to Cage himself: 'Chance comes in here to give us the unknown' (Nattiez and Samuels 1995, p. 48).

This was what I sought, in my desire to be surprised by the game and by myself alike. Ambiguities, ruptures, incongruities ... the magic of the unknown.

## an assignment

As I mulled over my notes and reflected on the theoretical aspects of the project, I also searched for inspiration in the world around me. While browsing a local curiosities shop one day, my predilection for expressive, open-ended games nudged me toward a quirky deck of cards called *Anywhere — A Travel Guide*. Created by design student Magda Lipka Falck, *Anywhere* offers a stack of whimsical prompts that recall the conceptual scores of the Fluxus movement (Friedman, Higgins & Proctor 2011):

'Take a walk with a wish in your pocket. Then leave it somewhere in the city.'

'Collect shadows. Notice the shapes, colours, directions.'

'Find a bridge. Cross it. If you can't find one — make one' (Falck 2014).

It's a charming project, beautifully designed, and when I first opened the box and began flipping through the cards I felt simultaneously excited and despondent. It hewed so closely to my own ideas about play and the subjective city that it almost seemed to moot the point of any further work on my own game. But despite its charms, *Anywhere* shares with Fluxus (and with Neurocam) a defining aspect that I had decided from the outset would not shape *The Parallaxis: the assignment*. For much like the work of fiction, the assignment does not need you. It is complete within itself, a fully realised concept that conveys authorship rather than invitation. Indeed, many of famed Fluxus artist Yoko Ono's instructional works are purely conceptual, such as her autumn 1963 *City Piece*: 'Step in all the puddles in the city' (2000 p. 50).

And yet I was a bit reluctant to dismiss the assignment altogether, as I was in the midst of completing one myself and had been finding it quite enjoyable. A photography project was making the rounds on Facebook and a friend had invited me to participate: take a black and white photo every day for five days, and share the results.

How perfect, I had thought when first invited — an excuse to go out wandering with my camera. As it happened I wandered no further than my own apartment on the first day, but this would prove to be a fitting start.

Over the next four days I cataloged a series of unassuming moments that had nonetheless given me brief pause. A festive scatter of triangles painted on the pavement; the ornate roofline of an old building criss-crossed with catenary; a soaring inner-city gum tree; summer cloud formations patterned through a screen door.

Though seemingly inconsequential each of these moments ripples out from its own centre, casting circles that connect the present to the future and the past. What would come next was an evolution and a synthesis of what had come before; of everything that had come before — and which this simple assignment had begun to bring into focus.



## a dream

15 January 2015

A cratered planet, its vast empty landscape awash in acid-negative colours like some kind of psychedelic heat map. Traveling overland, falling upwards, distances warp and crack.

Down in the basin of a crater, dark figures cluster around an object. The object: a camera, small and heavy and silver. *We give it to people who wanted to capture a vista.* It double-exposes every new photo with fragments of some other photo that it has taken before. *The camera that remembers everything.*

Now the basin is a jail yard in sinister monochrome. We are tossing dice to survive, still huddled in our circle. Looking for clues, trying to collaborate our way into a version of events that will show us how to escape by revealing how we got here.

The rest disintegrates into morning sunlight.

## fragile objects in unstable settings

Although I had yet to realise the precise nature of the framework that would structure the next evolution of the game, I was becoming increasingly aware that its methods would involve walking and photography. This felt right; not since the matchsticks had I experienced such certainty.

Perhaps this certainty made room for new ideas to bubble up; to slip in from the periphery while I was consciously attending to other things. For here a mundane digression into practicalities would lead me to discover my elusive frame.

The situation was straightforward: I needed camera gear that was better suited to the project. I owned a DSLR, big and heavy and touristy; a digital point and shoot, small and light and yet somehow even more touristy; and an expensive new mobile phone with a camera that outperformed them both. The phone was the obvious winner, but its sleek, fragile form was too modern for its own good. Every time I took a photo while out walking I had visions of it slipping from my hands and smashing to the ground. So I went looking for a phone case with a better grip. Wistfully I imagined a case shaped like a vintage camera, and began searching online for this invented object of desire. Alas, I found nothing in the shape of a nice old Pentax that could offer safe passage to my frail device — it would be another year or so before pop culture and consumer electronics fully converged on this aesthetic. But in my searching I did find something else: a new breed of photography gadgets that seemed to be gaining popularity, best described as mobile–instant hybrids. These devices included a case that turned a phone into an instant camera by bolting on a tiny printer; a phone that was an instant camera, with the printer built right in; and several models of stand–alone portable printers, designed to network with a mobile phone. Some of the devices had a deliberately retro design, and were clearly following Instagram's nostalgia aesthetic to the logical conclusion of a print revival.

▲ With on–demand printing of limitless, previewable copies, this revival was obviously a

modern take on the instant photo. But I also discovered a surprising number of new cameras that were using traditional Polaroid-style film. One moment, one blind chance, one print the only artefact of a collaboration between photographer and world.

▼ Anthropologist Gil Bartholeyns attributes the rise of Instagram and similar mobile phone applications to the increasingly 'cold and disembodied' (2014, p. 51) feel of digital photography and the resurrection of analogue cameras that eventuated from this dehumanising trend. 'Analogue photography was expensive and its results were uncertain,' Bartholeyns writes, 'yet they had the advantage of being 'alive'. There was greater nostalgia for the warmth of these renderings than for the people and things they depicted, and it was this that caused the birth of the lo-fi photography movement' (ibid.). But digital photography was not about to see itself eclipsed by this revival. 'Having achieved optical perfection, it could now simulate photographic imperfection,' Bartholeyns notes (ibid.). 'And so, in 2009 and 2010, a series of mobile phone applications began offering to simulate the square-format photos of the old Brownie, the warm colours of the Polaroid and all the delightful imperfections of family photography in the 1960s–1980s, such as vignetting and over-exposure. The pretence went as far as reflecting the physical nature of prints, reproducing the ravages of time, such as desaturation and scratching. Indeed, to take up the slogan of Hipstamatic, one of the key apps on the market, "digital photography never looked so analogue".'

I was intrigued, but I had other work to do as well. My plan for the evening was to review some project notes I'd made the year before. As I sifted through those old impressions and ideas, certain phrases drew my thoughts continually back to the present. Or rather, to the instant.



*fragile objects in unstable settings*

*working intuitively; responding to the moment*

*leaving a deliberate trace; visible and invisible layers of the city*

*nothing lasts forever*

By the time I went to bed I had made a decision: I was going to buy a new camera. And I knew exactly what I wanted: a Fujifilm Instax 90. It was a Polaroid-style instant with an unusual feature: a double exposure mode. *The camera that remembers everything.*

The next day I tracked one down; it was the last in stock locally. The film was sold out everywhere. I ordered some online, and waited for it to arrive.

While I waited, I thought idly about how I might use the Instax. About that alluring double exposure mode. A glimpse of landscapes; layered over, layered under. A feeling of compression in my chest.

I reached for my sketchbook — I had found my frame. Though I could hardly imagine that it would feel much like a game.

## vistas



Seven years, I had lived in Australia by now. I was a long way from home. But I was also two years an Australian citizen — so really, what was home?

A difficult question, as difficult as my ongoing attempt to make a life here that felt like it was truly mine. Australia began for me with a fracture that refused to heal; a plot twist that wrenched me from a new life as I expected it to unfold. The uncertainty that followed was relentless, blotting out the landscape and any recollection of the paths that I had

previously forged through blind terrain. I could not see this place, and thus estranged I could not see myself.

So it was perhaps inevitable that I would reach this point. That my desire to build a game to make the world more real; a game that was requiring me to play for real, would lead to such a simple, brutal plan.

I would go back to every place where I had lived since moving to Australia. I would start at the beginning, and walk my way into the present. This would take me to eleven locations scattered across Melbourne; eleven homes in seven years.

Seven years, I decided, in seven days. ▲

▼ As concepts like indexicality suggest, play is typically considered to be a relaxing leisure activity in which nothing happens for real. But as historian James Carse notes: 'To be playful is not to be trivial or frivolous, or to act as though nothing of consequence will happen. On the contrary, when we are playful with each other we relate as free persons, and the relationship is open to surprise; everything that happens is of consequence. It is, in fact, seriousness that closes itself to consequence, for seriousness is a dread of the unpredictable outcome of open possibility. To be serious is to press for a specified conclusion. To be playful is to allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself' (1986, p. 15).

Throughout all of the previous stages of the game, this is what I had been approaching. The ability to work propositionally (Jones 2009); to close the sketchbook and walk into the unknown. As I struggled with this process I finally came to understand the reason for my struggle: I had lost touch with the inner self that is

essential to the ability to play (Winnicott 1965). This understanding was communicated by that very inner self, which had been made more present by my struggles with the uncertainty of process.

Now that self and I stood together as if on a precipice, ready to leap into a much greater unknown. *To allow for possibility, whatever the cost to oneself.* This was what it meant to play for real.

## seven years



*Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone.*

*"But which is the stone that supports the bridge?" Kublai Khan asks.*

*"The bridge is not supported by any one stone or another," Marco answers,  
"but by the line of the arch that they form."*

*Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds:*

*"Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me."*

*Polo answers: "Without the stones there is no arch."*

*— Italo Calvino (1972, p.82)*

In my first real victory for process I embarked without design upon this endeavour that I would come to call *seven years*. My only framework was a schedule, often impractical, that charted the chapters of my life in Melbourne. I had never thought much about these chapters, but now their currents rose like ley lines across the city. Each day mapped a distinct passage, and that was all I had to follow.

I used public transport to arrive at most of my destinations, which were too dispersed to practicably be reached on foot. Once I alighted at my old tram stop; my old bus stop; my old train station, I would simply walk. Each day, without forethought, I found that I was making my way slowly toward that place which once was home. This approach was always anxious, fraught with the uncertainty of what I would encounter. And in truth every encounter was difficult. There was little in the way of absolutes; no obvious conclusions or resolutions to be reached. Even tears and laughter failed to resolve any particular experience into a simple *bad* or *good*. I had to stay with each irreducible moment (Jones 2009), or else turn away from the entire project. After these specific encounters I found that I would drift through my old neighbourhoods, retracing routes of habit and revisiting old haunts — again without conscious intent. The emotional intensity would begin to dissipate but always remained unsettlingly ambiguous.

I brought my phone and the Instax camera on this journey, uncertain as to how or if I would use either. As it turned out I did use both — intermittently, experimentally, and in a few cases accidentally. I also fell into taking notes almost immediately, which was unexpected. So unexpected in fact that I hadn't even thought to bring a notebook or a pen, and on the first day found myself tapping out lengthy notes on the cramped screen of my phone. Despite its frustrations I decided that I liked this method; there was something conceptually pleasing about having a notebook and a camera together in one device.

And so this is how the evidence of my precarious game survives: in text and photos, and a few fragments of video. To be honest, I still don't know what to make of these artefacts. Collectively they can be described as a reflexive diary, which documents the very thing that it creates. But what does it create? A research record, or an artwork? My chosen methodology asserts that it can be both — and indeed that it should be. This is the essence of performativity (Haseman 2006): the creation of 'symbolic data' (ibid. p. 6) that

'not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself' (ibid). Yet each time I revisit that symbolic data I feel exposed both creatively and critically. Because here is the thing: I did play for real. For seven days without remit, I got up and went out and followed this process no matter how it made me feel. Euphoric, agitated, heartbroken, frustrated, consoled, and many other emotions that were too complex or unfamiliar to grasp. I tried to express it all, without censure or defense.

But performative does not necessarily imply personal, and I question whether this diaristic data conveys anything universal enough to qualify it as research. Equally, these unfiltered words and artless images feel too raw to present as a creative work. Yet there is no question that *seven years* was a key phase in the game; a crucial moment of release in my struggle to allow the possibilities of the unknown. As such I have made several attempts to find the best expression of this journey into process.

My first attempt was sparse and rational, a diary in name only. Its envisioned context was here within the dissertation, as an interlude but not quite a fully realised artwork. Stripped bare of nearly all autobiographical detail, this version focused on logistics; just the facts. Notes on how I used (and didn't use) the cameras; observations about what had changed in my old neighbourhoods; a running commentary on the weather. Careful, structured thoughts triumphed over risky, messy feelings. Despite this restraint it clocked in at 8000 words, and read like it was embarrassed of every single one.

Acknowledging the failure of this austerity, my second attempt was simply a full transcription of my original notes. Risky, messy feelings were restored to the record. Alas, this approach merely rendered a staccato narrative that was more cryptic than evocative. Who could possibly understand why I took that photo of the graffitied laneway fence, or why moments later I laughed through tears when a stray tabby wound its way between

my ankles? Even I could barely articulate the meaning of these moments, and I wasn't sure I wanted to.

My third attempt remains a work in progress. Here I have tried to fill in certain gaps while leaving others to their mysteries; to listen for what still resonates and what has fallen silent. Nothing about the original experience has been altered in this presentation, but certain contours have been emphasised. In this approach I have been informed by the non-representational theory of human geography, which in its urge toward the evocative allows the unknown to remain unknowable. As ethnographer Phillip Vannini (2015) describes, it is an approach to research that seeks to present possibilities rather than establishing a definitive account.

'Imagine you are actually the one academic frustrated by your all-too-human inability to represent an event or feeling or encounter as you experienced it,' Vannini writes. 'Your orientation is toward the past of knowledge: you struggle to report precisely — or sufficiently creatively — something that happened already. That is happening because events are unique and their mimesis is impossible. But let us say your orientation changes. You cease to be so preoccupied with how the past unfolded and with your responsibility for capturing it. You become instead interested with evoking, in the present moment, a future impression in your reader, viewer, or listener ... It is no longer depiction, reporting, or representation that frustrates you. Rather, it is enactment, rupture, and actualization that engage your attention' (2015, p.12).

It is perhaps fitting that the final form of *seven years* remains unresolved. In this spirit I offer as an appendix to this document not a definitive account of the experience, but an excerpt of a possibility.



## stitching time



*Seven years* was a turning point in my relationship with process, but it was also an evolution of previous methods. In many ways it picked up where the drafts left off — those letters I had written to myself while I was in correspondence with my long-lost father. Both projects attempted to attend fully to the present moment; to stay with the irreducible experience of time and place. And both projects found that while these moments remained irreducible, they also evoked things that were beyond themselves. ▲

▼ Here non-representational theory is again instructive, speaking as it does of a 'relational view of the lifeworld' which 'zeros in on the crossroads between metaphysical and material' (Vannini 2015, p. 8). As Vannini elaborates: 'Non-representational researchers, alongside with relational scholars, believe that life arises from the entanglement of actors — human and non-human animals, organic matter, and material objects ... Such emphasis on relational materialism, immanence, and the

sociality of “things” prompts non-representational researchers to study associations, mutual formations, ecologies, constellations, and cofabrications that highlight how the conjunction “AND” matters more than the verb “IS” (ibid.).

'In short,' Vannini concludes, 'so much ordinary action gives no advance notice of what it will become' (ibid. p. 4).

In both its turning and its following, *seven years* was also a way forward. For improbably, the ritual had worked. I had arrived back in the present moment feeling that I was a part of the world rather than apart from it. This arrival was accomplished not through any single moment of epiphany, or even through the writing and rewriting of the experience, but just by going back and finding my own traces. The threads of me; the evidence that I had lived here and that this life was mine. I was weaving, mending, integrating.

It was this integration that allowed me to move on and expand my work beyond the personal. Not by getting it out of my system, but by getting it *into* my system. For while my readings on Buddhist unintegration had most certainly nudged me toward the idea of *seven years*, I had not understood just how necessary it was to *be somebody* in order to achieve the meditative state of being “nobody” (Engler 1986). This sense of self that I had reclaimed was not a puzzle I had solved only to discard when it unlocked the next gate. Rather, it was a compass that would enable me to travel confidently even when I had no map. ▲

▼ Buddhist psychologist Ron Crouch (2011) asserts this value of the self even as he emphasises its nature as process and not solid, immutable object. 'The self in

Western psychology is viewed as that function of the mind that helps us to organize our experiences,' Crouch writes. 'It takes raw sense data, memories, and other cognitive functions and turns them into recognizable narratives. It is critical for everything that we do. Without a strong sense of self, we literally could not make sense of anything that happens to us' (ibid para. 4).

Released not from uncertainty but from the blinding fear of it, I could finally see this place. I could move through it and with it, and I could begin to communicate with its more subtle frequencies. ▲

▼ An interesting confluence of Zen and non-representational theory arises here, where it is the "being nobody" of unintegration that opens up new possibilities for relating with other entities of the "lifeworld" (Vannini 2015). Zen scholar DT Suzuki alludes to these possibilities in his discussion of *satori* — the moment of enlightenment in which unintegration is absolute.

'The individual shell in which my personality is so solidly encased explodes at the moment of satori,' Suzuki writes (1994, p. 22). 'Not, necessarily, that I get unified with a being greater than myself or absorbed in it, but that my individuality, which I found rigidly held together and definitely kept separate from other individual existences, becomes loosened somehow from its tightening grip and melts away into something indescribable, something which is of quite a different order from what I am accustomed to.'

'This abrupt experience of satori, then, opens up in one moment ... an altogether new

vista, and the whole existence is appraised from quite a new angle of observation'  
(ibid. p. 23).

## pattern recognition



Before the next unfolding, an enfolding: *seven years* also contained a game within a game. Here I began to consciously address the idea of doubling that *The Parallaxis* had repeatedly made manifest. This was not the doubling of performative methodology, in which the articulation of the project was also the enactment of the project; or the doubling of methods, in which the reflexive and the reflective came together to establish the performative. Rather, it was the doubling that can be found at 'the crossroads between metaphysical and material' (Vannini 2015, p. 8); a doubling that speaks of 'entanglements ... associations, mutual formations, ecologies, constellations, and cofabrications' (ibid.). The game was primitive and quite literal, and in truth it did not hold my attention for very long.

But as the drafts were a conceptual precursor to *seven years*, this small experiment would prove to be a draft as well.

At the end of each day of *seven years* I would come home, briefly collapse, and then copy the day's photos onto my laptop to browse through. This became its own ritual; a second living of the day. But I also left the new photos on my phone, and when I was done going through them on my laptop I turned to this enfolded game.

*The camera that remembers everything.* That dream reverberated still. The double exposure mode on the Instax had been interesting to play with for a while, but it was never going to be my impossible machine. Impossible, yet so elegant: a camera with infinite recall of every image it had ever captured, able to randomly entangle new moments with old. I was convinced that I could make it real. I scoured the Internet, looking for technological scraps that I could stitch into a whole. When that failed I investigated the feasibility of building it from scratch.

In the end I settled for a readymade solution that got me at least part way to the realisation of my haunting dream. It was a free phone app (Stettiner 2014) with a simple interface: tap a dice icon (or shake the phone; nice touch) and the app would "double expose" two random photos from the memory card. (Which is to say that one photo would be superimposed on top of another, in reference to the analogue technique.) Each roll of the dice also applied a random, garish filter — a feature that I would occasionally switch off, only to admit that the embellished images were usually more interesting.

And so each evening I would sit down, glass of wine often in hand, and gamble with my ghost. What was I gambling on? That my dream quest hadn't been pure folly? That the chance arrangement of these signs and signals might reveal some kind of meaning; a found mythology of sorts?

*We are tossing dice to survive, still huddled in our circle. Looking for clues, trying to collaborate our way into a version of events that will show us how to escape by revealing how we got here.*

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-three/pattern-recognition/>

part four





if these streets



As I moved on from *seven years* I also moved on from any lingering idea that I was designing this game for others to enact. I was not play-testing, refining the experience before a public release. I was playing, and in doing so I was creating the 'symbolic data' (Haseman 2006, p. 6) of the experience. The play was the game. There was no test version; no trial run. ▲

▼ Here I return to the concept of play as a relationship that is open to surprise (Carse 1986) and which is anchored in an ability to communicate with one's own inner self (Winnicott 1965). It is a manner of play evoked by psychoanalyst Marion Milner, who writes of the adult tendency to suppress this form of magical thinking. 'Moments when the original poet in each of us created the outside world for us, by finding the familiar in the unfamiliar, are perhaps forgotten by most people,' Milner writes, 'or else they are guarded in some secret place of memory because

they were too much like visitations by the gods to be mixed with everyday thinking' (Milner in Winnicott 1971, p. 39). And yet we gain so much when we are able to cultivate an unguarded relationship with the unknown. As Winnicott notes: 'It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self' (ibid p. 54).

This decisive shift released me from the constraint of creating a balanced schema with which to engage other players, as John Cage had made his project. I was still intrigued by the transformative potential of ambiguity and indeterminacy, but now that I was no longer trying to facilitate the experience of this potential for a playing public I could follow more freely when it manifested of its own accord.

And where I wanted to follow was back out into the world; into this landscape that I could finally see. From *seven years* I left behind personal narrative but continued with the simple framework of neighbourhood and day. A collection of hours spent wandering a particular geography, drifting on its tides of resonance. No longer compressed by an itinerary, I let weather and whim dictate the when and where of these explorations. Autumn in Melbourne is warm and long, and my own inner-city neighbourhood nestles in among others that form a rich tapestry of urban life. Many days I walked out the door and did not return until the sun was low, only to have wandered less than a square kilometre over the course of the day. I would get lost in laneways that branched off from other laneways and then branched off again; entire worlds folded into streets I thought I knew. I spent the entire day on foot, never boarding public transport until my day was done — and only then if my drifting had carried me so far and tired me so thoroughly that I required a lift. In truth I much preferred to walk home in the dying light.

It was interesting to play without any specific frame. During *seven years* my history had been a lens, but a filter too. The synchronicities and signals that crackled through those days were a resonance between the outer landscape and my inner world. I was looking for my own traces, even in those left by others, and the city in its ever-flowing ambiguity had reflected what I sought.

Now I was seeking nothing, which seemed to open up a broader range of frequencies. I walked and photographed, and sometimes I made notes. I had no agenda other than to be out in the sunshine, allowing myself unmetered time in the spaces of the city that were often overlooked. For these were the places that exerted the most pull: residential laneways, quiet in the midday; and the industrial zones that invariably fringed each neighbourhood, not so quiet but with their own alien appeal. I avoided main avenues whenever possible, for there seemed to be an inverse relationship between the width of a street and its capacity to retain energy.

As I attuned to these marginal places their visual frequencies became more distinct. There was the street art, abundant in a city renowned for the form (Westbury 2009), and the base vandalism of graffiti tags. But flickering in and out between the two, sometimes overlapping with either frequency or both, was a signal of another sort. Obvious, oblique, ugly, beautiful, funny, sad, mysterious, bizarre: these signals had nothing in common except their lack of artifice. Confessions whispered to brick walls; found objects opportunistically adorning infrastructure; messages scrawled on all manner of surfaces with a simplicity that spoke neither of art nor of aggression (or which managed to combine the two). And as I walked, pulled from one signal to the next, a sense of communication began to accrue. An unintentional but undeniable call and refrain; allusions and suggestions; a conversation winking into existence and then out again.

It was almost as if these streets could speak, in a language that was all their own. ▲

▼ The idea of the city as a communicative entity can be seen as the evolution of a proposition, which threads its way through the varied histories of walking in the modern city.

The earliest expression of this proposal is the notion of the city as a dynamic, traversable text. The German writer Franz Hessel articulates this idea in his 1929 book *Spazieren in Berlin (Walking in Berlin)*: 'Flânerie is a kind of reading of the street, in which faces, shop fronts, shop windows, café terraces, street cars, automobiles and trees become a wealth of equally valid letters of the alphabet that together result in words, sentences and pages of an ever-new book' (translated by Frisby in Tester 1994, p. 81). Hessel was a close friend and collaborator of the renowned urban philosopher Walter Benjamin, who also constructed the city as a text. As the sociologist Graeme Gilloch remarks of Benjamin's writings: 'The physiognomical gaze transforms the urban setting into a hieroglyph, a rebus, to be deciphered. The archaeology of the metropolis involves the discovery and interpretation of its hidden inscriptions and traces. The city is a secret text to be read' (2013, pp. 139–140). Gilloch notes that Benjamin 'seeks not only to 'read' but also to 'write' a city' (ibid.), but his meaning here is both literal and literary: he speaks of the city-like qualities of the texts that Benjamin produced. Benjamin's sprawling *Arcades Project* 'constitutes nothing less than a vast text-as-city, text-as-labyrinth,' Gilloch writes. 'Its formal properties mimic the very set of urban experiences to which it gives voice. It is animated by the rhythms of the city that it endeavours to record' (ibid.).

Thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century carried forward this concept of city-as-text, while offering a more kinetic understanding of what it might mean to "write" the city. The French theorist Roland Barthes asserts that the city 'can be known only by ...

walking, by sight, by habit, by experience ... to visit a place for the first time is thereby to begin to write it: the address not being written, it must establish its own writing' (1982, p. 33–36). Likewise the French scholar Michel de Certeau describes the 'ordinary practitioners' (1984, p. 93) of the city as walkers, 'whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban "text" they write without being able to read it' (ibid.). 'The networks of these moving, intersecting writings compose a manifold story that has neither author nor spectator,' de Certeau continues, 'shaped by fragments of trajectories and alterations of spaces ... ' (ibid.).

Contemporary theorists have retrieved earlier ideas of the semiotic city, while further advancing embodied notions of engagement. The American writer Rebecca Solnit references Hessel's linguistic view when she observes that a 'city is a language, a repository of possibilities' (2001, p. 213). Moving beyond the textual, Solnit further suggests that 'walking is the act of speaking that language, of selecting from those possibilities' (ibid). The Australian academics Benjamin Rossiter and Katherine Gibson similarly refer to the 'speech act of walking' that 'creates stories, invents spaces, and opens up the city through its capacity to produce "anti-texts" within the text' of the city (2003, p. 440). The authors foreground the embodied experience of enacting this textuality, an emphasis that could perhaps be attributed to the *fin de siècle* material turn in human geography that concerns itself with 'lived experiences as "material", the body as "material" site of experience through bodily differences, and bodily production of particular subjectivities within "material" spatial conditions' (Cheng 2011, para. 9). 'The body is introduced as a sensual being,' the authors write, 'smelling, remembering, rhythmically moving — jostling with other bodies and in the process constituting active, perhaps multiple, urban subjectivities' (Rossiter & Gibson 2003, p. 440.).

The affective, multiple subjectivities of this proposal begin to suggest a 'relational view of the lifeworld' (Vannini 2015, p. 8) that acknowledges 'the sociality of "things"' (ibid.). And indeed, Rossiter and Gibson articulate these tenets of non-representational theory in their invocation of Walter Benjamin, who writes of losing oneself in the city 'as one loses oneself in a forest' (1978, p. 8). 'The walker becomes lost,' the authors write, 'allows the city — street signs, bars, cafes, billboards, passers-by — to "speak" to her as does a bird call in the wild or a twig crackling under foot' (Rossiter & Gibson 2003, p. 440).

Here finally the city is given voice. Not the voice of alphabet or hieroglyph, but the wildish, more-than-human voice of 'things themselves' (Cafard 2008, para. 35). With this voice the city speaks on its own terms, no longer a projection or subjective creation, and invites us into the deep play created by 'the many interpenetrating worlds of those things themselves' (ibid.).

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-four/if-these-streets/>

## found & lost

But then what I had feared; what I had experienced as the week of *seven years* neared its conclusion: I became a hunter of these signals, an acquisitive collector. No longer was I drifting in an open state, responding instinctually to the streets. Now I was looking deliberately and debating the merits of what I found. Should I take a photo? Was this signal "good" enough? Once these questions entered my mind, any sense of play departed. The enchantment was broken.

During *seven years* I had made note of this perceptual shift and carried on regardless, adhering to the project's itinerary and also its intent. To see this through; to reach a predetermined end in space and time. As it turned out my awareness of this shift provided its own countervailing force; or perhaps the force was asserted by the landscape itself. For on the final day, as I wandered my old neighbourhood where I had experimented with the badges, the resonance returned. This place that had once spoken to me so strongly again crackled to life with messages and meaning, generating a current that carried me through to my final destination and the project's poetic conclusion.

Now I lacked any of these forces to bring me back into the game — I had neither the structure of a schedule nor an emotional attachment to project or place. There was no *real* that I was playing for; I was simply walking around. This freedom turned into its own constraint: I began to think more consciously of what I was doing as making work. And of course, work is the opposite of play. It is full of expectations, which when unmet create frustration and self-doubt. I had felt these prickles of anxiety during *seven years* as well; had blamed myself for failing to maintain the balance that made the tightrope invisible. *Don't look down.* ▲

▼ The contemporary British artist Tacita Dean relates a similar experience of losing her effortless ability to find four-leaf clovers growing wild, after she exhibited her found clovers as a creative work. 'When I first showed my collection in 1995, for the first time in my collector's life, I became paralysed by an inability to find any more four-leaf clovers,' Dean recounts. 'It was as if I had turned the accidental action of finding a clover into something altogether too self-conscious ... I suddenly searched too hard and could no longer find' (2010, p. 215).

In Dean's experience as well as my own I find clear evidence of the assertion, sustained across decades of scholarship (Carse 1986, Huizinga 1955, Winnicott 1971), that play is by definition voluntary. It must have no reason beyond itself; nothing to interfere with the 'purposeful purposeless' that John Cage (1958, p. 5) saw as the essence of playing. This liminal state of surrender is perfectly described by a musician who performed Cage's experimental music: 'You are in a sense outside yourself. You are anonymous ... secondary to the moment of now. That now takes precedence. That now is almost playing you' (Clarkson 2001, p. 77).

Indeed, once Dean relinquished her external motivations for collecting she found that this experience of playing gradually returned. 'My clover collection is not a dead collection, although its constituent parts are dead,' she writes. 'No, because I had to surrender it and let it go, and stop my obsessive searching of grassy verges and uncut paddocks, I have at last now managed to re-find something of my ability to chance discover and to find by not looking. And I can now add, from time to time, a new clover to my collection' (2010, p. 215).



My photo collection was beginning to fill up with perfunctory images that bored me when I looked at them, and so I took a break from walking for a few weeks. But I already knew where I was headed next — I just needed some time to prepare.

## correspondence



For more than a decade now I had been photographing the sublime moments that I encountered during my walks, accumulating a catalogue of these transporting moments. In truth this catalogue was more of an archive, which is to say a collection of files that I rarely perused. But as I became more aware of my walking practice as a thing that I was actually doing, I also became more interested in the photographs that I was making as I walked. I discovered that to revisit one of these images was to be cast under its spell; to experience anew its specific energy. That energy was bound up in the narrative that gave it voice; the particular context that made me stop in recognition of the meaning that together we were making. And yet what each photo evoked was not a memory, but something more distilled and potent. It was an expression of something inexpressible; something that only this moment could convey, yet which seemed inextricable from so many other moments that might be.

In hindsight I suspect that this discovery had some part in the dreaming of my dream about the ghost camera. *The camera that remembers everything.* Landscapes layered

over, layered under; images in conversation. That dream in turn led to my gambling game with the photos from *seven years*, and also to another project that I had quietly been working on.

Shortly after the week of *seven years* concluded, I began transforming my photo archive into an actual catalogue. I wanted to play the gambling game with my entire collection of photos, which would require transferring the collection to my phone. (I had been unable to find a desktop equivalent for the mobile app that I was using to make randomised double-exposures.) But I had never bothered to separate my walking photos from the casual snapshots I had taken over the years. A decade of weddings, birthdays, holidays and family reunions. It took me a month to extract the photos that I wanted.

A week into this cataloguing project I began my neighbourhood walking days. And the night before my first walk I impulsively ordered one of the portable photo printers I had been eyeing since I bought the Instax. It was a Polaroid Zip, which networks wirelessly with mobile phones and can print sticky-backed photos the size of a business card in less than a minute. The printer itself is small enough to fit in a back pocket. When I ordered the Zip I wasn't sure what I was going to do with it, but by the end of my first neighbourhood drift I knew.

If my walking photos could speak to things beyond themselves, two of the photos I took that day seemed clearly to be speaking with each other. It was an obvious exchange, nothing subtle about it, and in fact I would have skipped the second photo if it had not communicated so plainly with the first. But the sense of conversation had been building throughout the day, and in that moment an idea was born: These images were a vocabulary (Hessel 1929; Solnit 2001); a concordance of the city ▲. As I became increasingly attuned to 'the many interpenetrating worlds' (Cafard 2008, para. 35) of the city streets, I was learning this vocabulary.

▼ My idea of the images as a walking catalogue was inspired in part by *The Quote Generator* (2006–2010), a durational project by the contemporary Australian artist Danielle Freakley. For three years Freakley spoke entirely in quotes, including references, when in public conversation. During the earliest phase of the project, before she had memorised enough material to improvise, she wore an overcoat-like 'harness' fitted with expandable folders that kept her collection of quotes organised by topic (Walker 2013).

I never had the opportunity to witness a live performance of the project, but during its second year Freakley and I were in correspondence and she wrote me a letter composed entirely of referenced quotes. Despite her description of *The Quote Generator* as — among many other things — 'a foreigner fumbling desperately, constantly trying to learn the new mode of speech' and 'an absorption of unoriginality' (Freakley), the letter is remarkable not only in its lucidity but also in its poetry.

*The Quote Generator* deals in the linguistic rather than the spatial, and its varied aims are altogether different than those of *The Parallaxis*. But it had not been so long since I was a fumbling foreigner trying desperately to learn this landscape — perhaps the influence runs deeper than I first recognised.

Perhaps I could begin to join the conversation? ▲

▼ If non-representational theory suggests a city that speaks, it also compels us to reply. This relationship is elegantly expressed by the anthropologist Tim Ingold,

who writes of waking from a dream with the following lines in his head:

'Often in the midst of my endeavors  
Something ups and says  
"Enough of words,  
Let's meet the world.'" (2015, p. vii)

'I do not know who put these lines there,' Ingold continues. 'Certainly, I did not invent them. But immediately upon awaking, and before they had time to evaporate, I rose from my bed to write them down. They remain, pinned to a notice board in my office, and every so often I take a look at them, to remind myself of the message they contain' (ibid.).

What Ingold sees in these words is 'a manifesto for a non-representational way of working' (ibid.). This way of working is propositional (Jones 2009), performative (Haseman 2006) and relational (Ingold 2000); 'not a set of regulated steps to be taken towards the realization of some predetermined end,' but rather a means 'of carrying on and of being carried — that is, of living a life with others, humans and non-humans all — that is cognizant of the past, finely attuned to the conditions of the present, and speculatively open to the possibilities of the future' (Ingold 2015, p. vii).

'I call it correspondence,' Ingold elaborates, 'in the sense not of coming up with some exact match or simulacrum for what we find in the things and happenings going on around us, but of answering to them with interventions, questions, and responses of our own. It is as though we were involved in an exchange of letters. "Let's meet the world," for me, is an invitation — an exhortation or command even — to join in such a correspondence' (ibid).

*Interventions, questions, and responses ...* in this correspondence I would finally find my game.

## meeting the world



The Zip printer took a fortnight to arrive, during which time I continued my neighbourhood walks despite the growing sense of tedium. It was still good to be out walking, although autumn was beginning to cool into winter.

I also continued with the project of creating a portable image catalogue from my larger photo archive, although I was doubtful at this point that I would use it to extend my double-exposure game as planned. The idea of endlessly remixing my own history felt akin to sitting at home talking to myself, now that my walking had revealed this conversation of the streets. I was more interested in what might be revealed if I brought those old signals from distant lands into correspondence with the present moment.

The Zip arrived but it was another fortnight before I finished organising my image catalogue. When it was complete I had a photo album for each of my meditative walks, beginning with a May 2004 walk in Portland, Maine. I imported the entire collection onto my phone, and despite the late-April chill I headed out the door.

I still felt like I was hunting, and for the first 20 minutes or so I found nothing. But then I came upon a signal, emblazoned larger than life on the side of an old warehouse, that immediately brought to mind a response from my collection. Excitedly I sat down on the cold ground and pulled out the printer and my phone. After wirelessly linking the two I called up the photo that I wanted and sent it to the printer. Presently the little device began to hum, and slowly a miniature photo emerged. I confess, with no academic pretence, that it felt a little bit like magic. After several minutes of struggle with the adhesive backing on the photo, and then a near-disaster with an unexpected gust of wind, I affixed the image to the wall below its corresponding signal. I then tried to take a photo of the two for the sake of documentation, but the vast difference in scale between the two made this task nearly impossible. As I walked away I wondered if anybody had observed my actions, although I didn't dare to look around. Still, as I strolled away with eyes fixed forward, I was smiling.

The Zip had rekindled my dwindling sense of play, and had infused this play with a feeling of wonder and joy. Suddenly the game seemed to have boundless potential. As the day progressed I became attuned to a new range of frequencies, which had previously been eclipsed by my focus on the traces left by deliberate human activity. These other frequencies were attempting to communicate even on my first walk after *seven years*: looking back through the album of that day I can see the stirrings of awareness, and then an unmistakable moment of attunement. But soon after this I seem to lose reception; the photos narrow down again to predominantly textual signals.

Now the spectrum was alive with chatter, awakened by the printer's ability to bring these signals into direct conversation with each other. The expectations that had turned my game into a hunt gave way to an anticipation that was decidedly playful. This transformation was wrought not only through the increased variety of these new frequencies, but also through the very nature of their signals. Shadows, puddles, the



unexpected poetry of abandon and decay. Such ever-shifting ambiguity did much to help me understand why the game had previously become inert.

The playful nature of these more indeterminate frequencies became apparent on my second day out with the Zip. I was trying to print a photo to place within a rooftop's peaked shadow that was being cast upon a laneway fence. The shadow encompassed a perfectly-drilled circle about the size of a golf ball, and for reasons that are lost to me now I found the composition to be both pleasing and intriguing. As it happened the Zip's battery had gone flat and required a boost from the portable charging cell that I had brought along. Once it was powered up enough to print the photo I then tried for the first time to use a sheet of sticky dots I had brought along to reinforce the adhesive on the photo paper, only to discover that the dots were much more difficult to apply than I had anticipated. Some 15 minutes after I had begun working on this installation, it was finally complete. The hole in the fence was no longer contained within the shadow, to my disappointment. I wandered down the dead-end laneway to continue exploring and by the time I walked back out again 20 minutes later my installation was no longer in shadow either. I was crestfallen at first, and then delighted. The shadow and I had created a secret game, that might be discovered by a passer-by who glanced down at just the right time of day.

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-four/meeting-the-world/>

only this



The Instax had stayed at home since *seven years*. I was yet to find a use for its double-exposure mode that didn't feel contrived, and the cost of film was a deterrent to experimenting. When I began using the portable printer I also worried that if I brought the Instax along it would be a distraction; a demand to listen on too many frequencies at once. I had experienced this manner of distraction while experimenting with the smiley face badges, on the evening that I distributed both the tagged badges and their corresponding stickers. The placement of each type of artefact required attunement to competing aspects of the streetscape, which together with the rigid rules I had established for distribution made any sort of resonance impossible to achieve. Likewise, the Instax and the Zip seemed to call for differing modes of engagement, although I had not yet experimented enough with either to be able to articulate those differences.

Unexpectedly, it was the Zip that led me back to the Instax. Out with the printer for a third

day, becoming more attuned to the city's ephemeral frequencies, I felt a stirring that my digital devices were unable to answer. This time it was not shadow that stopped me but a play of light upon a laneway fence, and yet I was held by something more than just this flickering visual. Cold clear air, leaf rot and skitter, a peel of laughter somewhere. A moment. The only one, no copies to be intricated with some other place and time. Just the infinite glimpsed through this window, imperfectly perfect in its low fidelity; indelible in its ephemerality. ▲

An instant.

▼ Early in this project my readings on affective geography led me to a book that has influenced me greatly: *Everything Sings: Maps for a Narrative Atlas* by the American artist and cartographer Denis Wood (2010). Long frustrated with the instrumentality of map-making and its calculated ends (plotting airstrikes, planning subdivisions), Wood asked if instead it might be possible to create maps that were 'an expressive art, a way of coming to terms with place, with the experience of place, with the love of place' (ibid p. 18). *Everything Sings* is Wood's attempt to answer this question. It does away with the 'map crap' (ibid. p. 18) of street and scale to chart a different vision of Wood's Raleigh, North Carolina neighbourhood. Each map is visually distinct, plotting the place that is Boylan Heights through the occurrences of a particular phenomenon. Flowering trees. Barking dogs. Wind chimes, radio waves, Lester's paper route. Jack-o'-lanterns on porches, the light at night on Culter Street.

The Parallax is not a mapping project, and Wood's influence has likewise not been in his methods. Rather it is in what his methods reveal; 'the way a certain poetic specificity manages to resonate' (ibid p. 19). Wood articulates this

specificity throughout the pages of his atlas, both in words and in his unconventional maps, but there is one passage in particular to which I always return. In it I have found a manifesto akin to that expressed by Ingold's dream; a methodological philosophy encrypted in a koan:

'I say to you there is no real deal. There is only this starlight falling tonight on these asphalt streets still warm with the sun's heat, these slopes down which the streets slip, these mains beneath them with the runoff from this afternoon's rain, and — listen! — if you bend over the manhole cover, you can hear the sound of the rushing water. There are only these wires scarring this sky, these trees with their heavy shade, this streetlight casting those shadows of branch and leaf on the sidewalk, those passing cars and that sound of a wind chime. But none of it is Boylan Heights tout court and none of our maps pretends to catch more than a note or two of a world in which everything's singing' (ibid, pp. 29–30).

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-four/only-this/>

## a horoscope

I don't believe in astrology. But I've long been a fan of Rob Brezsny's eclectic horoscopes, and for many years now I have received them by weekly email. This one arrived shortly after I started working with the Instax again.

'CANCER (June 21–July 22): "I am trying to be unfamiliar with what I am doing," said composer John Cage in describing his creative process. That's excellent counsel for you to meditate on, Cancerian. The less expertise and certainty you have about the rough magic you're experimenting with, the more likely it is that this magic will lead you to useful breakthroughs' (Brezsny 2015).

## bricks, concrete, glass



Excited by this multi-faceted game that I was now playing, I tried to continue with my walks. But the cold was brutal; the worst I had experienced since moving to Australia. This would turn out to be Melbourne's coldest winter in 26 years, and there was no playing through it.

While I hibernated, I reflected. Specifically I thought about photography and its role in these methods that I was developing. Just before I stopped walking for the winter I made a decision, one that I had been contemplating for a while: it was time for a new camera. I loved the portability of my phone, and I concur that 'the best camera is the one that's with you' (Jarvis 2009), but I was beginning to feel that the project had evolved beyond my phone's capabilities.

Throughout my years of walking, photography had been an act of collecting. Collecting moments; collecting something akin to trophies during that brief frustrating phase that felt like hunting; collecting remixable components for the game as I moved into making

installations. This collecting was always creative; I considered it a collaboration between my own perception and the present moment. But it was also reasonably straightforward. The constructed nature of the frequencies with which I had been playing made for moments and resulting images that were easy to read. Their ambiguity factor, in retrospect, was typically quite low. The resonance that I could still detect in these images was imparted by my personal connection to the moment, even if that resonance managed to transcend the narrative of memory. I saw now that the only participation I could bring to these straightforward frequencies was the filter of my inner world, and when that context was absent the collecting started to go stale.

Perhaps it was this very boredom that made my attention more available for other frequencies; a resignation of expectations that opened up a space for the unexpected to unfold. For as these new frequencies crackled to life I found that they did indeed require more space; more attention. Or rather, more participation. They did not emit discrete, straightforward signals that could be collected by simply pressing the shutter. What they offered instead was what I had detected in the most evocative of my early photos — *an expression of something inexpressible; something that only this moment could convey, yet which seemed inextricable from so many other moments that might be.*

I found that these frequencies often communicated through a language of composition. Not just this broken plate, but its particular pattern; the precise lines of its break. The two halves stacked together just slightly askew. An arcane geometry of shadow, light and texture that seemed to hint of things beyond itself. ▲

More participation.

▼ As I finished writing this passage I realised that it was not the arcane or the

esoteric that I was encountering in these compositions, but rather the endotic. The writer Georges Perec (1973) proposes the endotic as that within the everyday which is unknown because it remains unexamined, and further suggests that the endotic is more worthy of our fascination than the exotic.

'What's needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology, one that will speak about us, will look in ourselves for what for so long we've been pillaging from others. Not the exotic anymore, but the endotic,' writes Perec. 'What we need to question is bricks, concrete, glass, our table manners, our utensils, our tools, the way we spend our time, our rhythms. To question that which seems to have ceased forever to astonish us' (ibid. pp. 177–178).

I first encountered Perec's 'surreal take on the social sciences' (Highmore 2001, pp. 176) in the writing of Surrealist *masqué* Max Cafard (2008), whose detournement of the Situationist drift into his own notion of deep play also appropriates the endotic. Indeed, it is Cafard's endoticism that has influenced my own thinking both consciously and unconsciously.

'Georges Perec ... describes his approach to the endotic as a concern with "what happens everyday, the banal, the quotidian, the evident, the common, the ordinary, the infra-ordinary, the background noise, the habitual" and with the questions "how can one account for it, how can one question it, how can one describe it?"' (Cafard 2008, para. 54). Cafard extends this project to propose an endoticism that 'is concerned not only that we focus intently on the evident, the common, and the ordinary, and allow them to reveal what they are, but also that we be open to finding the unexpected in the evident, the unique in the common, and the extraordinary in the ordinary. And that we explore the ways in which all of



these things both are what they are not and are not what they are. We must be ready to discover that they all lead beyond themselves into other worlds, other regions of being and experiencing' (ibid).

Not just this broken plate ...

Would a more sophisticated camera enable this participation, and allow me to go even deeper into the game? Or would it just get in the way? I gambled on the former, and traded in my bulky old disused SLR for a new mirrorless Olympus that was small and capable — the camera that would always be with me. ▲

▼ In my winter bookstore browsing I happened upon a book called *The Practice of Contemplative Photography* by Andy Karr and Michael Wood (2011). The book offers itself as an introductory guide to Miksang, a school of photographic thought that the authors developed following their studies with the Buddhist meditation master Chögyam Trungpa. The practice that the book outlines is ultimately focused on the production of striking images, an outcome which at most had been a secondary consideration in my own photography thus far. Of greater interest was the book's attention to process, which offered me a new perspective on the perceptual shift that I had begun to experience during my walks.

'Normally we ally ourselves with thinking-mind: we obediently follow wherever it leads,' the authors write (ibid. p. 41), noting that emotions are also a part of thinking-mind. 'The contemplative approach presents an entirely different alternative: we can align ourselves with intelligence that is not bound up with either

thoughts or emotions. This intelligence is called insight, mindfulness, awareness, wisdom, and so on. (In the traditional Zen analogy, these terms are all different fingers pointing at the same moon.)'

In reading this I realised that while I had been working intuitively on my previous walks, the personal narrative that I brought with me (in particular during *seven years*) was still a process of thinking–mind. The conscious/unconscious divide that seems to play such a significant role in creative expression (Winnicott 1953) is not a distinction between thought and emotion, but rather between conceptual and non–conceptual. Representational and non–representational. Self and no–Self. In order to evolve the game I had needed to restitch my sense of self — specifically in relation to place. *You have to be somebody before you can be nobody* (Engler 1986, p. 34). But as that phase of the game concluded I found myself experiencing the boredom that one typically encounters as the mind begins to settle into a meditative state. The restless urge to turn away from the unformed and the unknown. *Collect, collect, collect*. In finally accepting that boredom and relinquishing my need to find something to see, I had walked myself into a new way of seeing.

'The root meaning of the word “contemplate” is connected with careful observation,' write Karr and Wood. 'It means to be present with something in an open space. This space is created by letting go of the currents of mental activity that obscure our natural insight and awareness' (2011, p. 3).

But what did the camera have to do with this?

'Photography can be used to help distinguish the seen from the imagined,' the

authors conclude, 'since the camera registers only what is seen. It does not record mental fabrications. As the photographer Aaron Siskind said, "We look at the world and see what we have learned to believe is there, [what] we have been conditioned to expect ... But, as photographers, we must learn to relax our beliefs"' (ibid p. 2).

Not just this broken plate ...

## return



*13 September 2015*

Flowers everywhere. Bloomed branches overhanging, tumbling into laneways. Petals, perfume, buzzing bees.

The fresh bright wood of a newly installed fence, rough and splintery.

Oh, that breeze. Inspiring collective action across the city: to spend the afternoon on sunny balconies drinking cold white wine.

Open windows, music from every direction. Amplified and exuberant; small and tinny and private. Song of so many unseen birds. The drone of airplanes overhead.

Return of long shadows and deep golden light. Return, return, return.

## double exposure



Spring unfurled. The laneways were a chaos of all the things that winter had discarded — dead plants denuded of their pots but still root-bound by those memories; broken heaters; a mop; a car door. In the midst of this chaos I walked, and photographed, and made installations. Some days seemed to suit one piece of equipment more than others, and would predominate the type of work I made. The Instax liked deep shadows and unexpected patches of light. The Zip was more unpredictable, and in this sense more playful. The new camera was daunting for the first few days, until I grew accustomed to its way of seeing. Then it became the easiest of all three to use, and threatened me as such with my own laziness and insecurity. It was tempting to spend the day simply adding images to my collection.

For the installs required not only more time and more participation, but more exposure to the public. I felt this exposure in the act of setting up an installation: my deep-seated

desire remain invisible, and thus allow the work an ambiguity of context, had not dissipated since the badge experiments. I also felt exposed by the work I left behind, because I had no grand plan for what I was doing. I was quite literally practicing in public, trying to find the shape of this game entirely through instinct. This meant attending to my uncertainty and attempting to discern its origin. Why did I hesitate, in this particular moment? What was my ambivalence trying to say? Was it merely giving voice to that eternal doubting critic, or was it telling me a secret about this magic that I sought?

These questions carried extra weight now that I was finally and somewhat unexpectedly playing with others. The installs required no particular response; like the frequencies with which they were entangled, they were an invitation to perceptual participation. But what exactly did I want others to perceive? ▲

▼ Many months after I began making the installations, I found a conceptual model for these works in David Abram's writing on the communal nature of perception.

'The encounter with other perceivers continually assures me that there is more to any thing, or to the world, than I myself can perceive at any moment,' Abram writes. 'Besides that which I directly see of a particular oak tree or building, I know or intuit that there are also those facets of the oak or building that are visible to the other perceivers that I see ... I sense that as a perceivable presence it already existed before I came to look at it, and indeed that it will not dissipate when I turn away from it, since it remains an experience for others — not just for other persons, but ... for other sentient organisms, for the birds that nest in its branches and for the insects that move along its bark, and even, finally, for the sensitive cells and tissues of the oak itself, quietly drinking sunlight through its leaves. It is this informing of my perceptions by the evident perceptions and sensations of

other bodily entities that establishes, for me, the relative solidity and stability of the world' (1997, p. 39).

The installations participate in this establishing of the real, but in a playfully subversive manner — suggesting patterns and relationships beyond the normal ordering of our perception. What do we notice? What meaning do we make of the things we choose to see? What would it be like to perceive differently?

what if



Many of my favourite installations from The Parallaxis were made during this early phase. Looking through my documentation photos I experience anew the delight of unexpected encounter; the sense of wonder; the attunement to place that I would eventually come recognise as distinctively my own. Each installation is novel, having not yet fallen into patterns that would come to shape the game.

But about a month after emerging from winter hibernation my notes begin to voice a discontent. I once again felt that I was not playing for real. The game was just a game, all of its magic accounted for with equivocations of philosophy. *What is, what is, what is.* Thinking mind had been displaced by the no-mind of Zen perception, a reflective surface free from the distortions of *what if*. Impervious to the possibilities of what might lie *sur les pavé*.

I was resisting uncertainty again; resisting speculation, proposition. Despite my endless talk of the unknown, I felt safer in the bright light of the rational. But I was also bored with



being safe. The weird, the dark, the inexplicable: these things had always called to me. And now they were voicing their frustration at being so long ignored.

*Where's the witch? You've become afraid of your own shadow; afraid of anything that hasn't been sterilised by a good meditative boiling. Walk it out, walk it off — maybe you should try to walk it in. Walk deeper into this than you ever have before. Play the game you want to play, not the well-mannered game that you think you should be playing.*

*If you want to make a magic that's real, you have to play for real. ▲*

▼ *Where's the witch?* My frustrated epiphany owes itself in large part to the contemporary Australian artist Mikala Dwyer, whose work I had become acquainted with during my winter reading.

While I hesitated to embrace the weird, Dwyer's work suffers from no such hesitation. Her installations and performances clearly articulate her fascination with forces unseen: ritual, spiritualism, the occult. 'One could read her works through the "cooler" lens of contemporary installation practice,' writes critic Anthony Byrt (2014, p. 9), 'or recognise what they actually are: spaces of invocation filled with invisible energy.' Byrt attributes this aspect of Dwyer's work to her own 'witchiness' (ibid.) — and indeed her 2012 exhibition *Drawing Down the Moon* takes its name from the most well-known of rituals in contemporary witchcraft (Adler 2006).

As I familiarised myself with Dwyer's work I repeatedly found reassurance of the witchiness in my own methods, through similarities that were surprisingly specific.

'I think all matter is conscious to some degree. Everything has a frequency,'

Dwyer remarks. 'Sometimes, it takes a while for material to warm up to you so you can actually sense it. You have to be in an attentive state. I try to get to a point where things can speak for themselves rather having me impose my voice upon them' (Dwyer in Leonard 2014, p. 57). As Byrt notes, this attunement is central to Dwyer's way of working. 'Rather than arriving at a site with a fixed plan, she comes bearing objects — sometimes truckloads of them,' he writes, 'and allows works to develop in situ, based on a particular relationship with the site and the way those objects "speak" to it' (Byrt 2014, p. 12). This brought to mind my own installation methods, and the various attunements involved. To place, to equipment, to my image collection. A constellation of entities in conversation with each other.

But it was more than just the particularities of method that made me take note of Dwyer's work; it was the larger possibilities that these methods proposed. 'Art and real magic know subtler paths still,' writes the anthropologist Michael Taussig (2014, p. 29) in the exhibition catalogue for *Drawing Down the Moon*. 'What if the human-thing couple actually persisted all this time despite centuries of confident pronouncements as to its demise? ... What if, in Latour's phrase, we were never modern, and, apart from heated verbiage, there never was a mechanical universe with dead objects on one side and lively humans on another? What if that picture of reality is stupendously false and silly, yet we adhere to it same way as people — so we are told — once thought the Earth was flat?'

*What if, what if, what if.*

## shadow fitzroy



*Perhaps this dialog of ours is taking place between two beggars named Kublai Khan and Marco Polo; as they sift through a rubbish heap, piling up rusted flotsam, scraps of cloth, wastepaper, while drunk on the first sips of bad wine, they see all the treasure of the East shine around them.*

— *Italo Calvino (1972, p. 104)*

A summoning spell can be a deceptively simple thing. I had apparently just conjured one.

Two days after I dared my witchy self to play for real, I returned to the game without this exhortation specifically in mind. I simply walked, as I had always done, and tried to settle into that sweet spot between attention and expectation. The awareness of attunement, which as Graham Joyce (2014) observed in his musings about walking and brainwaves, usually takes about 20 minutes to achieve. Beta descending to alpha; slowing down, slowing down.

On this day however I seemed to walk myself into an even deeper modulation. A frequency of witchy weirdness, almost like a lucid dream. I was in the practice of naming the photo album from each walk by its date and place, but when I got home that evening and uploaded the images from the day I simply named the album *shadow fitzroy*. The next day I tried to capture the experience in writing, but as I revisit those words now they are glaringly inadequate.

The game had changed, and so had I.

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*05 October 2015*

Yesterday was made of shadow and light. Today walking home from Woolies, beautiful little whirlwinds of pollen and leaf litter catching the late sun. Thinking about beauty, about darkness. How do I work with them together? Can I? And then the realisation that has been so long in coming: accept things as they are. The heat, the fatigue, the heavy grocery bags, the walk home. Lungs, muscles, clouds, feet.

A neighbourhood opens itself slowly. It takes time and trust; patience and curiosity; persistence and bravery. Every time I think I've seen all of Fitzroy, gone down every laneway and more than once, something new reveals itself. I don't know of any other place so folded in on itself, so dense with violence and filthy jagged beauty. I left the house intending to make my way down into East Melbourne and possibly over to Richmond, but Fitzroy caught me in its eddies and swirled me gently back into itself. Each time I thought to leave it would lean in and whisper another secret — something luminous; something dangerous. It showed me things that I could not make sense of, did not want to make sense of. For hours I remained transfixed, until my own body broke the spell with its need for food and water — and as it turned out, rest.

I'm beginning to feel something with this place. Not about it, but with it. Becoming integrated, although hardly in a communal sense — I rarely talk to people when I'm out. Something deeper, like a mouldy glimmer in my soul. A shadow deepening into material existence. Sinking in, feeling the streets yield to me like a lover. But this is not romantic. I'm still afraid of getting cut by dirty glass, stepping on a needle, turning down the wrong laneway at just the wrong moment. I'll still wear my boots when I go out.

## phylum



*Las partes son el todo, el todo son las partes.  
(The parts are the whole, the whole are the parts.)*

— Gabriel Orozco (1998)

The game had one more trick up its sleeve.

While creating my portable image library to use with the mobile printer I had noticed that my photos tended to repeat certain themes. Starting as early as my first walks in Portland, and becoming more pronounced throughout the week of *seven years*, the images reveal an interest in particular things. Brooms, doors, cobwebs, circles. Powerlines and rubbish bins.

With all of the walking and photographing that I had been doing in recent months, this

collection was rapidly growing. I was still organising the images into albums based on date and place, but I knew that soon I would no longer be able to keep a corresponding index in my head to help me recall and locate specific images to print for installations. I needed another mechanism to help me navigate my photos. These recurring themes suggested that the mechanism I sought was a taxonomy.

I retained my existing album structure because the container of the day was still important to my walks. Each day was its own conversation, with its own energetic currents. ▲ But as I worked my way through these albums adding tags to individual photos, a larger world began to emerge. Additional themes became apparent: deep shadows, distorted reflections, triangles, hearts, ribbon and wire and other lines that seemed to bind, women's faces, imagined faces, vegetation pushing through the cracks.

▼ The idea of the day as a container for a documented walk has also been explored by Australian contemporary artist Simryn Gill and Mexican contemporary artist Gabriel Orozco, although with differing intents.

#### a sense of place

Gill's photographic series *May 2006* began to take shape when the artist set out one day from her inner-Sydney home 'with no agenda beyond using up a roll of soon-to-expire black-and-white film' (Fitzgerald 2013, para. 1). Gill proceeds to wander 'with a deliberate openness, stopping to converse with neighbors and strangers and photographing objects and scenes that happen to catch her eye' (ibid.). She produces nine photos that day, and goes on to shoot a new roll in a similar fashion every day for the rest of the month.

Gill, who was born in Singapore and moved to Australia in 1996, found that these

walks brought her to 'a new understanding of her place in the world' (ibid. para. 2). I recalled my own journey with *seven years* when I read this, although unlike my solitary undertaking Gill indicates that her experience was largely shaped by human interactions.

'When you're walking slowly and looking at things, there's always someone who wants to stop and show you a flower; they're trimming their hedge or they ask you where you're from,' Gill recalls. 'And then you say: "Well, where are you from? Germany maybe? Ireland?" "I don't know, I'm Australian." "Oh, really. Well maybe I'm that too. Although I haven't changed my papers yet." And you'd have these strange conversations. It was very nice' (ibid.).

I have retrospectively found further resonance, and perhaps a closer correspondence of intent, between *seven years* and Gill's work *A Long Time Between Drinks* (2005–2009). Here Gill returns some 12 years later to the Adelaide suburb where she lived upon first moving to Australia, 'looking for points of view and perspectives that she remembered, with a question about whether these vistas in her mind were still the same, if they had changed, or were they simply artifacts of how we remember' (MCA). For this work Gill produced 13 black-and-white photographs of her old neighbourhood, which she then housed in the physical container of a wooden box. 'The photographs are a record of the question, but not a complete answer' (ibid.). In the albums that trace the days of *seven years* I can likewise detect my own question, and a sense of resolution that remains elusive and ambiguous.

#### all these things

Gabriel Orozco is more interested in abstract narratives than personal connection



to place. He uses his video camera to create "stories" that follow his thread of attention as he walks his way through a single day. 'I wake up in the morning. The light has to be okay,' he says (1998, p. 193). 'I have breakfast and then start walking down some street until something catches my attention. That's when the movie starts.'

These movies absorb themselves with the happenstance of the everyday. 'Walking down, say, Sixth Avenue, I'll suddenly see something that intrigues me — a plastic bag, a green umbrella, an airplane tracing a line in the sky' (ibid.). But Orozco emphasises that he is working with focus rather than chance, following one thing as it leads on to another. 'The kind of connection that intrigues me is contiguity,' he says. 'Borges wrote somewhere that all these things that are next to each other, we call the universe. It's this "being next to each other" that appeals to me' (ibid).

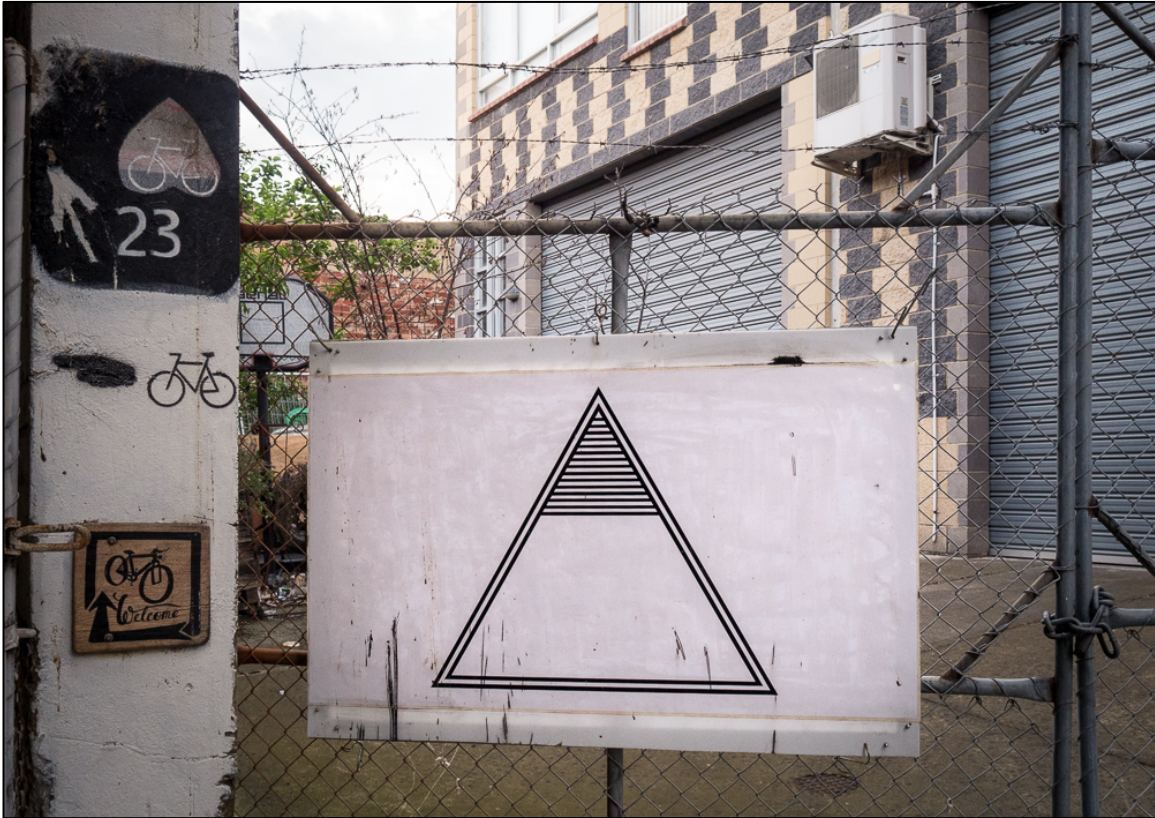
Reading Orozco made me realise that I had always thought of my own walks as collaborations with chance. But while I would not say, as Orozco does, that 'the flow of images in my work is extremely controlled' (ibid.), I certainly recognise something of his methods in my albums. Like Orozco's movies, each album can be viewed as a 'series of punctums' (ibid.) that in their contiguity attempt to present 'a day of awareness' (ibid). *All these things that are next to each other ...*

I had been thinking of the signals that I encountered on my walks as emanations of particular frequencies. Now as my taxonomy slowly revealed a world, I saw that these frequencies were in fact the forces animating this world; the entities of the subtle city.

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/part-four/phylum/>

## subtler paths still



Not every punctum fits neatly into my taxonomy. Some moments stand alone. But as I continue to play, this taxonomy continues to grow. New entities awaken gradually as patterns of awareness become evident: once I begin to notice that I am noticing a certain thing, I look back through my albums and see that I have been seeing it for longer than I knew. Mirrors. Basketball hoops. Orphaned shoes. Sociable clusters of beer bottles; the often-unintentional tableaux of domestic windowsills.

As each new entity emerges the subtle city becomes more visible; more real. I walk through different streets than I did a year ago. Even when I am not playing; when I leave my cameras and my installation equipment at home — even then, I am still playing.

The photographer Dorothea Lange once remarked: 'The camera is an instrument that teaches people how to see without a camera' (Lange in Meltzer 1979, p. vii). I remember,

years ago, naming a Facebook photo album that I had created for one of my meditative walks *I take my camera with me because we see things differently*. The phrase had come to me unbidden, much like the words in Tim Ingold's dream, and likewise stayed with me in their poetic almost-articulation of an idea. In Lange's remark I see this idea fully articulated: my camera has shown me how to see differently. ▲

▼ This journey toward a photographic way of looking, and in particular the urban typologies that it has unearthed, can be framed within a larger history of landscape photography. More specifically, although unintentionally, it references the New Topographics movement of the 1970s — albeit with some fundamental differences in both philosophy and style.

"New Topographics: Photographs of a Man-Altered Landscape" was a 1975 exhibition of American landscape photography, curated by William Jenkins and held at the International Museum of Photography in Rochester, New York. The show signalled a major shift in the genre: away from pristine wilderness landscapes as captured by such masters of the form as Ansel Adams and Edward Weston, and toward the landscapes of America's rapidly expanding industrial and suburban sprawl — and its concomitant urban decay (O'Hagan 2010). In stark contrast to the awe-inspiring vistas of Adams and Weston, these images instead seemed to offer 'an aesthetic of the banal' (ibid. para. 1). Tract houses, empty streets, trailer parks, warehouses: these were the "new topographics" that reflected a swiftly changing country back onto itself.

The show would come to influence an entire generation of photographers, but it was also inspired by pioneering work that came before. During the previous decade the American artist Ed Ruscha self-published a number of small photo books that challenged prevailing notions of what made a worthy photographic subject: 26

*Gasoline Stations* (1962), *Some Los Angeles Apartments* (1965), *Every Building on the Sunset Strip* (1966), *34 Parking Lots* (1967). The books are exactly as they sound: meticulous, dispassionate catalogs of their titular subject matter. It is in this serial eye for the mundane that Ruscha's photographic legacy is most pronounced, both in the New Topographics exhibition and in the work of other artists from the 1970s and onward. Roger Merten with his trees of Poultneyville, New York (1977), his basketball hoops (1978), his Christmas trees (1983); Judy Fiskin with her detailed survey of California architecture in *31 Views of San Bernardino* (1974) and *Dingbat* (1982-3); Wendy Burton with her abandoned structures in *Empty Houses* (2001-2003) and *Empty Houses: Interiors* (2003-2006). Indeed, the persistent interrogation of interrelated visual motifs has become such an established approach to urban and suburban landscape photography that it is hard to say whether I became aware of its ubiquity before or after I began to work more consciously with this method myself.

I can say, however, that I was working purely from instinct when I designed the exhibition for The Parallaxis. Here the gallery walls were given over to a series of variously patterned image grids, each documenting a particular urban typology. Variations on a theme. And so I felt a surprised sense of recognition when I learned that this manner of presentation was also used by several of the original New Topographers, notably Lewis Baltz. A Californian like Ruscha, Balz most frequently turned his lens toward industrial sites and disused buildings, returning to the same locations repeatedly to document their precarious states of flux. (Like Balz I also found myself documenting certain places as they changed over time, albeit with less intentionality.)

'Often displayed in a grid format, it is important to Baltz that his pictures be seen collectively as a group or series. The series format suits his desire that no one image

be taken as more true or significant than another,' notes the artist's biography on the Museum of Contemporary Photography website. This sentiment is echoed by Marc Freidus, curator of the 1991 exhibition "Typologies: Nine Contemporary Photographers" — which in many ways was a reprisal of the original New Topographics exhibition. Freidus notes that 'any single picture has a limited truth value' and that serial repetition offers 'a comparative truth, a certain kind of access to the subject matter' (Freidus in Curtis 1991, para. 5). Speaking of the same exhibition, photographer Rod Slemmons invokes the music of composer Philip Glass: 'You hear the same tones over and over, but what's visually exciting are the overtones set up between things' (ibid. para. 6).

Indeed, as I progressed through the designing of my own grids, I began to detect leitmotifs arising within each arrangement. Unexpected relationships; patterns within patterns; secrets on the verge of being spilled. The hypnotic powers of the typological are made apparent in the work of Bernd and Hilla Becher, the only European photographers to be featured in the 1975 New Topographics exhibition: 'Like Victorian collectors with their cabinets of eggs or insects, this photographer couple collected and catalogued industrial buildings. In the early Seventies, their attention turned to cooling towers, and they printed the images like sheets from an inventory, nine or ten towers to a page. The effect of this repeated pattern was very powerful. A single cooling tower may look beautiful, but nine cooling towers on one sheet looks like a series of ancient monoliths, or temples, or plinths for statues of long-forgotten gods' (Farley & Roberts 2012, p. 194).

It is telling that the Bechers, whose work evokes such mythic resonance, were the only non-Americans to be included in Jenkins' show. Balz has said of his own work that he was 'looking for the things that were most typical, the things that were the

most quotidian, everyday, unremarkable, and trying to represent them in the way that was the most quotidian, everyday and unremarkable' (Balz in O'Hagan 2014, para. 3). Balz's work (and the New Topographics movement as a whole) can be seen as a lament in the form of mimicry, 'making visible this new homogenised America in a way that echoed – and criticised – the soullessness of urban planning and the corporate rationale that lay behind it' (ibid. para. 7). This hostility toward the landscape — or more accurately, toward the degradation of the landscape — manifests as an aesthetic that has been called 'austere ... minimalist, detached, dispassionate' (ibid. para. 1), and 'mechanical' (Alexander 2015, p. 128).

While I too have felt anguish, often acutely, in the face of similar assaults on the urban and suburban landscapes of Melbourne, *The Parallaxis* has emerged from entirely different sentiments than those of the New Topographics movement. Here I hearken back to the wonderment expressed by landscape historian John Stilgoe (1998) and artist-cartographer Denis Wood (2010), and the playful mischief of Surrealist Max Cafard (2008) — all of whom bring a warm-heartedness to their engagement with place. This generosity of spirit is shared by at least one photographer previously mentioned, who has been historically associated with the New Topographics movement but in fact seems to be only superficially aligned: Roger Mertin (fellow typologer of basketball hoops).

'He was interested in local environments wherever they happened to be,' notes photographer Carl Chiarenza, a close friend of Mertin's (University of Rochester 2001). Curator James Borcoman (1991) teases out this element of curiosity in Mertin's work, making clear its significance: 'Mertin is out to give us the whole truth — great cornucopias of irrelevant things,' he writes. 'These photographs are not of trees only, but of spaces. Spaces dense with information, a kind of information to which the eye

is often inured.' *I take my camera with me because we see things differently.* Borcoman concludes: 'The photographs tell us about the act of looking. In a sense, they are also Mertin's gift to us, above all a gift of discovery. For Mertin has shown us that the things of this world hold magic and mystery in greater abundance than we have imagined.'

But the game now is about more than seeing, more than sight; more than mere perception with any or all of the senses. It is about participating in a conversation with a city that is fully animate. This evolution from inner to outer, from personal to universal, can be traced using the theoretical references that I have drawn upon throughout the project.

### hoopspells

Winnicott's (1971) model of play allows us to revisit the magical omnipotence of infancy, in which the world is made of objects that answer to our bidding. Of course when we play as adults (and even as older children) we recognise the artifice of the activity: the cardboard box is not really a spaceship. But what we gain of the rational we lose of the material: these objects could not possibly answer us, because they are not animate. No longer are we Baudelaire's frustrated children, who 'turn about their playthings and shake them, hurl them to the ground, and often break them in their bafflement and even rage at their stubborn refusal to awaken into life' (Warner 2009, p. 4). We understand that we must awaken these playthings ourselves, through the alchemy of imagination. In fact it is the assumed compliance of our lifeless props that makes this alchemy possible. 'The thing about playing is always the precariousness of the interplay of personal psychic reality and the experience of control of actual objects,' writes Winnicott. 'This is the precariousness of magic itself, magic that arises in intimacy, in a relationship that is being found to be reliable' (1971, p. 47).

The play of Winnicott's transitional space may conjure a magic that is more reliable than it is real, but my experience of making this game has led me to believe that all magic is out of reach without a capacity for this essential form of play. *To make a game that's real, I have to be real too.* Winnicott's central preoccupation was with the experience of feeling real, which he placed in a reciprocal relationship with creative expression and play. 'In creative living you or I find that everything we do strengthens the feeling that we are alive, that we are ourselves,' he writes (1990, p. 43), elsewhere noting that '[o]nly the true self can be creative and only the true self can feel real' (1965, p. 148).

My tumultuous beginning in Australia had left me so shell-shocked by the unknown that I had lost the ability to live creatively; to 'allow continued transitional space and play via suspension of knowledge, certainty and conviction' (Coburn 2013, p. 43). Anything that was uncertain was a threat. The early phases of this project helped me to find that open space again; to experience the reflexivity between performer and performed in which play creates player creates play.

Yet this reflexivity is not just a simple loop; it seems to act more like a spiral. For my experience has shown me that the repeated invocation of transitional space makes this space easier to hold, and also continually expands the circumference of its magic circle (Huizinga 1955). The Parallaxis has indeed become a game that locates doors where none seem readily apparent, suggesting the possibility of a creative response to uncertainties that grow ever more indeterminate and unstable.

Finding my way back to this reliable magic was an apprenticeship of sorts; a process of becoming real enough to go deeper into the game.

### triangulation

Crucially, this sense of realness allowed me to finally see the place I now called home. In



fact it allowed me to do more than see — for as previously noted, this game has never been primarily about visual perception.

*I could make sense of it; I could move through it and with it; I could begin to communicate with its more subtle frequencies.*

These subtle frequencies were the materiality of place communicating directly with my senses, in that moment before perception gives way to conception. The game became a playful challenge: stay in this moment for as long as you can. Rather than attempting to animate the world by force of imagination, allow the possibility that it is already animated by other forces.

This possibility is hinted at in the 'deep play' of Cafard's Surrealist endotocism, a materialist philosophy that is concerned with 'the interpenetrating world of things themselves' (2008, para. 31) and exhorts that '[w]e must be ready to discover that they all lead beyond themselves into other worlds, other regions of being and experiencing' (ibid para. 54).

And yet the things-themselves of endotocism seem somehow to remain inert, lacking voice or agency. Perhaps it is the emphasis on *thing*, which implies an object, which brings us back to Winnicott. Once I turned the witchy corner into the shadows of Fitzroy I began to seek a theory that better represented my experience; my perception of a material world that was actively communicating.

Eventually I found this theory in a book that I have owned for more than a decade; that has inhabited three continents with me; and that I have yet to finish reading. Each time I pick up David Abram's *Spell of the Sensuous* (1997) I quickly put it down again and reach for a notebook and pen, for it is a book that consistently makes me think new

thoughts — thoughts which seem important enough to capture before they are replaced by the next thought. It is a book that I have referenced repeatedly throughout this work; that prefigures and informs non-representational theory, in which '[m]aterial objects are no mere props for performance but parts and parcel of hybrid assemblages endowed with diffused personhood and relational agency' (Vannini 2015, p. 3). But it is a book that, in truth, I had not picked up for several years until I pulled it from the shelf one day about eight months after my shadow walk through Fitzroy.

I started again at the beginning, which was fortunate as Abram builds from one key idea to a second. The first idea is the foundation of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, which is that all perception is inherently reciprocal.

'In the act of perception,' Abram writes, 'I enter into a sympathetic relation with the perceived, which is possible only because neither my body nor the sensible exists outside the flux of time, and so each has its own dynamism, its own pulsation and style. Perception, in this sense, is an attunement or synchronization between my own rhythms and the rhythms of the things themselves, their own tones and textures' (1997, p. 54).

Here the things themselves begin to stir, already hinting at Abram's next proposal. They also recall the city of Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis, in which the 'characteristic features are really temporal and rhythmical, not visual' (1996, p. 223). Lefebvre hints as well at the attuning nature of perception when he observes that '[t]o extricate the rhythms requires attentiveness and a certain amount of time' (ibid.).

Rhythmanalysis does not necessarily imply a material world that is fully animate, but the theory of perception that Abram draws from Merleau-Ponty's work most certainly does. This is Abram's next key idea, which underpins his 'ecology of magic' (1997, p. 3).

'The landscape as I directly experience it is hardly a determinate object,' Abram writes, 'it is an ambiguous realm that responds to my emotions and calls forth feelings from me in turn' (ibid. p. 33). In this ambiguous realm, Abram observes, '[m]y senses connect up with each other in the things I perceive, or rather each perceived thing gathers my senses together in a coherent way, and it is this that enables me to experience the thing itself as a center of forces, as another nexus of experience, as an Other' (ibid. p. 62).

In Abram's Other I recognise the forces that animate the frequencies of my game; that call me to participate. And in his emphasis on ambiguity, emotion and response I am able to identify the reason for my frustrated protest against contemplative models of perception such as the Miksang approach to photography. My witchy turn was a rejection of the detachment inherent in such methods; the privileging of observation and awareness over the vulnerability of participation. *What if I allowed this to be real?*

The Parallax is a game, but this query is more than just playful speculation. As Abram indicates, there is something real at stake.

'When the animate powers that surround us are suddenly construed as having less significance than ourselves,' he writes, 'when the generative earth is abruptly defined as a determinate object devoid of its own sensations and feelings, then the sense of a wild and multiplicitous otherness (in relation to which human existence has always oriented itself) must migrate, either into a supersensory heaven beyond the natural world, or else into the human skull itself — the only allowable refuge, in this world, for what is ineffable and unfathomable' (ibid. p. 10). This migration, Abram asserts, has implications for all inhabitants of the material world: 'To shut ourselves off from these other voices, to continue by our lifestyles to condemn these other sensibilities to the oblivion of extinction, is to rob our own senses of their integrity, and to rob our minds of their coherence. We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is not human' (ibid. p. 22).

Abram's ecological concerns do not engage much with the city; *The Spell of the Sensuous* is the result of a research project that Abram undertook in rural Asia. The closest he comes to discussing the built environment is a lament on the disconnect that he experienced upon returning to the suburbs of North America when his research trip concluded. 'As the expressive and sentient landscape slowly faded behind my more exclusively human concerns, threatening to become little more than an illusion or fantasy, I began to feel — particularly in my chest and abdomen — as though I were being cut off from vital sources of nourishment,' Abram writes. 'I was indeed reacclimating to my own culture, becoming more attuned to its styles of discourse and interaction, yet my bodily senses seemed to be losing their acuteness, becoming less awake to subtle changes and patterns' (ibid. pp. 25–26).

I experienced a similar sense of reverse culture shock several years ago, on my return to Melbourne after five weeks spent camping in remote areas of Australia. I longed for the endless horizon; for the sky, the silence, the red dirt, the heat. A pair of brolgas magnificent in sudden flight. And yet I wonder if there might be hope yet for us city dwellers; a nourishment that we can find in these shadowy streets.

Abram concludes that '[p]rior to all our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists' (ibid. p. 57). What if the subtle city is a world in which we can all be urban animists?

*What if?*

## parallax



*There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite.  
A finite game is played for the purposes of winning,  
an infinite game is played for the purpose of continuing the play.*

— James Carse (1986, p. 3)

In *The Parallax* I have found an infinite game, one that I continue to play even as this doctoral journey comes to its conclusion. Carse writes that all infinite games are able to persist because they evolve 'like the grammar of a living language' (ibid. p. 9), recalibrating their rules to achieve sustained viability. As he further notes: 'Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries' (ibid. p. 10). I likewise hope that my methods of playing *The Parallax* will continue to evolve; that I will see challenges rather than limitations in the boundaries that I encounter. For as geographer J.D. Dewsbury notes of non-representational ways of working: 'Part of the ethos of this type of research is to keep the researcher alive to change and chance, to prevent the

researcher from stopping their travels and forging a safe methodological territory to re-use again and again impervious to new twists and turns of direction and focus' (2010, p. 324).

This project began as an inquiry into ambiguity and the playful possibilities of subjective meaning-making. As the performative, reflexive nature of the project gradually became apparent, so too did the relationship between these twin concerns of the uncertain and the experiential. *More participation*. What I propose with The Parallaxis is this: to communicate creatively with the unknown is a practice, which constitutes a form of knowing. As Bateman asserts, 'we should give up the idea that to know is to repeat propositions that are both true and justified as being so: isolated claims mean nothing. To possess knowledge, we must engage in practices — our own, and those of others too numerous to count' (2016, p. 12).

The practice of The Parallaxis is the practice of play, as expansively proposed by both Carse and Winnicott. It is a practice that strives to play for real; to 'allow for possibility whatever the cost to oneself' (Carse 1986, p. 15). This play acknowledges 'all the intricate perceptual practices of our living body that Maurice Merleau-Ponty drew attention to' (Bateman 2016, p. 24), affording the possibility of knowledge that is 'unharnessed and unprogrammed by thought' (Vannini 2015, p. 4).

We gain much from knowledge practices that allow the uncertain to remain uncertain; that are able to accept the 'symbolic data' (Haseman 2006, p. 6) of our research as 'polysemic and open-ended' (Hunt 1995, p. 42). These practices assert 'the power of the precognitive as a performative technology for adaptive living, as an instrument of sensation, play, and imagination, and a life force fueling the excesses and the rituals of everyday living' (Vannini 2015, p. 4). In doing so, such practices offer us 'a way to come

to understand the world that does not simultaneously set the stage for limited use of that knowledge' (Langer & Piper 1987, p. 280).

The scholar Michael Sherringham writes: 'The project is a frame, but nothing that comes to fill that frame can be said to complete or realize the project, which always remains open and unfinished. Yet within its framework a shift, essentially a shift of attention, takes place. The project brings us into proximity with something that might have seemed familiar, but which we now acknowledge more fully' (2007, pp. 146-147). The Parallaxis has been a shift in both attention and perception, through its enactment of a speculative epistemology of place. This epistemology offers 'other diverse ways of knowing' (Vannini 2015, p. 15) the city that we are continually creating, and that is continually creating us.

*Would you step sideways into this subtle city, if suddenly a door cracked open?*

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# appendix: seven years

## day one



It's noon already as I leave the house. Yesterday I woke at two and had to call the whole thing off — am I avoiding this? *This, this*; I don't even know what *this* really is. And I certainly don't know how to do it, whatever it might be.

I walk through the car park and across the footy oval toward the bus, and for a few moments everything is okay. Better than okay. Sunshine, blue skies, light breeze. Trees still full and green; autumn t-shirt weather. As I leave the oval and cross the street I glance up at the second-storey window of the converted warehouse on the corner, for no particular reason. A flat bronze sculpture like a paper cut-out catches the sunlight, winking down at me. She is nearly life-size, a warrior. Shield in one hand, dagger in the other, sword sheathed at her back. Has she always been there? Instinctively, I pull out my phone and take a photo.

More avatars appear as I make my way down Webb Street: silent, dark-haired women emerging from the strata of Fitzroy's anarchic streets. One looks out from the side of a green postal box, her pensive gaze on the middle distance as a tear rolls down her cheek. Scrawled below her, possibly by a different hand: *Born II*. The next is younger, a stick-up in sci-fi blues, ambiguously armed with a futuristic weapon or prosthetic — possibly it's both. Her face half in shadow, she looks back over her shoulder into this world; into my eyes. Her message is clear: *follow me*. Or maybe: *go away*. I encounter her again several times before I reach Smith Street.

Other signals crackle through on textual frequencies: *Snuf; Knock; This is what I looked like before. Hope you like our art!*

At Smith Street the signals fade out, but when I return home in the evening and transfer my photos to my laptop I will discover another image; a final avatar. Inexplicably wedged between my last encounter with the shadowy cyborg and my first photo upon arriving in Elwood is a snapshot taken several months before, of an Akemi Ito stencil that I loved so much I made it my Facebook profile picture. Not a woman yet, this one, but a girl of maybe nine. In black paint on a white wall she sits, the suggestion of a broken doll before her, looking stricken and slightly surprised. She has wings, still lifted as if maybe she has just landed. As I write this, I notice that she also has a prosthetic leg. On the map created by this otherwise chronological trail of photos, she is in exactly the spot where I first found her.

\*

By the time I reach Hoddle Street I'm hot and distracted, wishing I had traded boots for sandals when I dashed back upstairs to grab my sunnies. I board the 246 and my

thoughts are nowhere and everywhere at once; we rattle through Collingwood and Richmond and over the river into South Yarra and I stare out the big plate glass window but see nothing. It's not until we reach St Kilda that the shock of return snaps me out of it — or rather, into it: oncoming traffic reflects in the window, layered over then under then over the landscape once so familiar, and I am hypnotised. It is autumn of 2008 and I have barely finished unpacking.

\*

The brakes hiss and we shudder to a stop at the canal. My stop. Not our stop — you cycled everywhere like a machine; undoubtedly still do. The bus pulls away. When there's a break in the traffic I cross over. The footpath, the wooden bridge, that distinctive seaside light. How alien it felt when I first arrived — a diffuse glare, almost blinding. How can the light be so different north of the river?

\*

I can't believe I'm really here. I can't believe I'm doing this.

\*

Oh god. Pretty sure I just walked past H, bent over browsing veggies outside the little organic green grocer. Did he see me? Was it even him? What if I hadn't gone down the wrong laneway just before, trying to find the back gate to his place. Would I have missed him altogether? Or would we have walked straight past each other, forced to decide what to make of that moment? My hair is long again — surely he would recognise me.

*i get so tuned in to talking with you that i start to sync with your timezone and feel strangely jetlagged afterwards. it's weird.*

*i don't think i've ever met anyone i could talk for hours with like i can with you.*

*i've never loved anyone the way i love you.*

*saying i love you is somehow an inadequate way to describe how i feel. it's more than love. it's everything.*

*you can absolutely trust me 100%. i can't see how anything negative could ever come out of a foundation such as what we have built.*

*i can absolutely promise you that i will never consciously do anything to hurt you.*

Surely he would recognise me.

\*

I'm still shaking as I turn the corner into his laneway — my laneway, our laneway, the wine shop over the road; oh no, please don't cry — and suddenly everything is a confusion of iridescence. Soap bubbles fill the air, landing on my face and my bare arms like unwelcome kisses. They're coming from a bubble machine in the doorway of a toy shop that was never there before, and without thinking I duck in. The place is barely bigger than a closet and filled with whitebread whimsy: fairy wings, magic wands, gilt-edged storybooks. Are you right behind me, coming down the laneway with ingredients for dinner? Did you stop off and get a bottle of sauv blanc? And am I hiding in here

because I want to find out, or because I don't? Both. Both. I buy myself a bracelet made of rainbow-coloured wooden beads and slip it on before stepping back into the laneway.

\*

I don't see you again, if I saw you at all. Standing outside your back gate I am empty. The bins have nothing to say and the hard rubbish that has been strewn about denies this place as home. I take a photo because I feel like I should, which makes me feel like a stalker, which makes me feel sick and hollow and utterly alone. I stumble away toward the foreshore, blinded as much by tears as by the glare of alien light.

\*

I need to sit down and write before all of this is gone. But where? Elwood is not built for introspection; it offers no refuge for hiding in plain sight. I cross Beach Road and head for the safest place I can find: a playground, empty and enormous. Also new. For some unfathomable reason I haven't brought a notebook, so I curl up on a wooden platform and start tapping out notes on my phone.

\*

A family arrives. I leave, relocating to a bench along the beach path. It's cold and windy here and I feel out of place, dressed up in city clothes. I used to walk this path, in my runners and my old soccer shorts. Did I fit in then? Was I happy? I try to bring myself back but I can't. I'm too cold to remember; too uncomfortable to let myself care. Still, I force myself to stay. I haven't been here long enough to go.

\*

Every once in a while, in my life, a stranger walks past who captures my attention. Not for any particular or consistent reason. A glimmer of curiosity: what is her world, this 60-something blonde with the tasteful trackies and the distant gaze? What is she going home to? When was the last time she cried? She moves out of my field of vision, and soon after that out of my mind.

\*

There's something to be said for just sitting with a thing that's uncomfortable — which my phone has perversely tried to make "unchangeable". Maybe it's not unchangeable, maybe it is. Maybe sitting with it isn't about trying to change it or get comfortable with it; maybe it's just about acceptance.

Also getting okay with taking up space. Allowing myself to be here, to stretch out my legs, to let the people walking past just walk past. Even the ones who stare. Watching the sailboats, watching the windsurfers, wondering if he might be out there. Being okay with the wondering because maybe this isn't about him; about us. The us that never really was.

That couple down at the water's edge — is that him? Would it matter if it was?

It's not.

Seven years. Seven years. Seven years. The wind is still cold, but the sun is also warm.

\*

Leaving is unexpected agony, and yet there's no reason to stay. H is everywhere here; he is nowhere. It doesn't matter where he is. I don't want to see him. What would I say? The whole project would come undone if I tried to explain what I was doing.

And I know it's time to go. As I walk back along the canal I'm so knotted up with anguish that I can barely breathe — *Why have I put myself through this all over again?* But then comes a flicker of concern about Saturday timetables: the 246 sailing past, irretrievable for another 20 minutes. The knot slackens and I pick up my pace.

I thought I would stay longer. This feels like giving up; like I would have found some sort of resolution if only I had stuck it out, looked deeper, tried harder. But in the end I was just drifting, void. Metaphorical but true.

### postscript

I step out of the lift at home and I'm greeted by the most improbable thing: bubbles. Blanketing the beige industrial carpet, swirling in the drafty air. There is nobody else around. For a moment I stand and watch as one floats up toward me, then dances away on some invisible current. The air goes still and it drifts down, catching slants of early evening light. Before it comes to rest I turn and walk away.

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\* Accompanying images at <http://dissertation.the-parallaxis.com/appendix-seven-days/>