

## Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney

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### **The known world**

Abstract:

This essay examines the dual consciousness that needs to be activated when the creative arts are used as the basis for scholarly research. In an academic tradition that has always prioritised analysis and critical distance, how and why should we generate, value and communicate the intimately involved and embodied knowledge—the tacit knowledge won from active experience—that often develops in the experimental and iterative practices deployed by artists? How can tacit knowledge be usefully explicated and communicated? And is there any chance these two cognitive modes can inform and enrich each other—the implicit and the explicit?

Biographical note:

Ross Gibson is Professor of Contemporary Arts at the University of Sydney. As part of his research he makes books, films and art installations and he encourages postgraduate students in similar pursuits. His recent works include the books *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland* (2002) and *The Summer Exercises* (2009), the video installation *Street X-Rays* (2005), the interactive audiovisual environment *BYSTANDER* (a collaboration with Kate Richards) (2007), and the durational work ‘Conversations II’ for the 2008 Biennale of Sydney.

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techniques, Gorz could stand at a contemplative distance from an object or phenomenon in order (i) to distil its galvanising elements and (ii) to offer prognoses about how all these engaged components might be driven or adjusted in lived experience. Accordingly Gorz addressed the world by referring first to all extant analytical accounts in history and then by proffering his own views for argument and test amongst his peers. His domain of knowledge was located mainly outside of himself and alongside the objects and phenomena being considered. To say it again, an optimal *critical distance* and a set of thoroughly debated precepts were obligatory to his mode of acknowledgement. His method was mainly discursive and objective.

Doreen, by contrast, tended to put aside extant theoretical templates and morphologies when she addressed the world's enigmas and experiences. This is not to say she was uninformed or naïve. Rather, she would typically plunge into an experience as immediately and intensively as possible, choosing to abjure critical distance in the first instance. Whatever Doreen came to know of the investigated experience, Andre contended, she knew mostly at the level of subjective *conviction*, much the same way a great technician can have embodied know-how, but with a moral rather than a pragmatist tone to the cognition. Doreen's knowledge was dense and held close, as if it lurked in some entangled imbrication meshing herself into all phenomena being investigated. Whatever she knew, it was usually not critically distanced or communicable in extant terminology. But Andre repeatedly found Doreen's insights to be compelling and *authoritative*. Doreen could make serious claims to knowledge, and even though it was shaped to the same worldly phenomena that Andre parsed, her knowledge was of a different order to the philosophically precepted understanding that Andre struggled to engineer. A different order, not lesser.

So the memoir accounts for Andre's understanding and admiration of Doreen's ability to generate lucid, emphatic opinions in response to actual experiences that had been palpably but also thoughtfully endured, absorbed and synthesized into robust conviction. He had learned over time that these opinions were knowledge. And he knew they had the force of wisdom in them:

The authority—let's call it ethical—of such opinions does not require debate to hold sway. Whereas the authority of a theoretical opinion collapses if it can't convince through debate (Gorz 59).

Doreen drew understanding as directly as possible from her *experience* and in so doing she continuously unfurled a line of insights, starting in privacy before being decreed occasionally to the larger world, usually filtered through Andre's publications. By contrast, Andre tended to scoop together his pre-existing theories before carrying them repeatedly over to the experiences he was interrogating, so that in argument with himself and with other scholars he could observe how his extant theories might get shifted by the active, unruly world even as that world was always being knocked askew by the myriad beliefs that were always being applied to it. As he contemplated his marriage year by year, Andre saw evermore clearly that the equal melding of the two modes of knowledge—his discourse and Doreen's ardently felt convictions—afforded them both a powerfully enhanced grasp on experience.

Assaying this marriage of two clearly different methods, it's clear that *Letter to D*

offers important lessons for all kinds of academic research, particularly if we can learn firstly to imagine changes to the traditionally gendered roles that were foisted upon Andre and Doreen, and secondly if we accustom ourselves to the idea that one person can and should be equally adept at both modes of knowing, that one person can entertain both mentalities.

In this essay I will be concentrating on research—which I can define quickly as the purposeful generation and communication of fresh and useful knowledge—that is pursued through artistic activities. But the knowledge generated should not be limited only to the arts. In any discipline or academic field that seeks fresh understanding, the precepts discussed in this essay should be applicable.

### **Know this? First understand that.**

Setting out to know the world better with art, we need definitions. We need first to define ‘knowing’ and ‘art’, so we can have convictions and debates (Gorz’s two concomitant modes) concerning some roughly agreed fundamentals.

To know is to be in a state of having understood or comprehended something. Knowing—deriving from ‘gnosis’—is a state of being imbued with some illumination, blessed with the ability to see into a mystery, to dispel the ignorance (which is the state of i-gnosis, the state of *not* knowing). Knowing is thus an after-effect of understanding. Literally, understanding is the process of bringing oneself close to the quandary, to stand under or in proximity to a mystery, to come in from outside its radiation and influence. By coming in and standing under the mystery, you can *comprehend* (‘com’—‘with’; ‘prendre’—to take), you can literally take *this* aspect in hand with *that*, you can combine yourself with the mystery till you and it imbue each other and you *know* it with a glowing, gnostic sense of the rightness of your understanding. And then you need to know what it is that you know. You need to distil the principles of your knowledge momentarily, before using them as a way to reenter the experience with more focus and with better questions.

Note the message that comes through emphatically here: you need to step both outside and inside the mystery. Not one without the other. This doubled compulsion will push through the rest of the essay.

### **Art is ...**

So, if we are using art to chase knowledge via research, how do we define art, how do we know we are with it and in it?

Etymologically, art stems in part from the Ancient Greek word for ‘to join, to turn, to make complete’. Hence, ‘articulation’ and ‘arthritis’. An artist makes a fulfilling conjunction and causes a turn in matter, time, space or events. This is why we evaluate art partly according to its ability to make changes in the given or perceived world. It’s why great art is often felt to be transformational, even transcendent. So, here is a pocket definition of art to carry through this essay: you know you are encountering art when you are engaging with an intentional process or product that

causes surprising transformations in matter or in a moment.

### Art as Research is ...

Research and art can join effectively to make knowledge whenever their conjunction causes a shift away from ignorance or befuddlement. The shift can often take you to a new set of befuddlements, of course. Even so it is *the shift in commonsense* and *the fresh ability to account for that shift* that ensures the occurrence is *research*. (Note: you can do research for art, research about art and research through art. Mostly it's the latter process that concerns me here.)

Acknowledgement—the shift in knowledge—is instigated when the researching artist conducts a productive and purposeful *experiment*. Etymologically, to experiment and to experience are closely related. (Indeed the French noun for ‘experiment’ is ‘*expérience*’.) The experimenter goes consciously and interrogatively into and then out of an experience, knowing it somewhat by immersion and then somewhat by exertion and reflection. Here is the oscillation between being inside and being outside, between ‘being Doreen’ and ‘being Andre’. An experience is a dynamic and complex system that must be known through engagement with the system’s organising tendencies and through attentiveness to the entropy and change also coursing through it. An experience is best understood experimentally, through trial and error, through a developing awareness of the actions and repercussions that are available and definitive inside the system.

Thus we can now expand the quick definition of research that I offered earlier. Here is the chain of actions, reactions and outcomes that must be managed well in any productive research process:

the researcher **identifies** a need and defines a gap in knowledge attending to that need ----->

the researcher collects all the extant information around the gap in knowledge, thereby surveying the field of everything pertinent that is already known ----->

the researcher formulates a **method** and a set of experiments which will allow him or her to step from the known world into the mystery ----->

experimenting, plunging into experience, the researcher **flows** along with the dynamics and complexities of action and reaction within the mystery until some **shift in understanding** has been sensed or observed ----->

extracted from the experiment in that instant of noting the change, the researcher reflects on the experience/experiment, struggling for critical distance in order to **synthesise and espouse** some newly known proposition which can be drawn out from the fleeting hunches and implications of experimental studio-work until the proposition can be explicated privately to oneself first and then can be communicated to the scholarly world, the outside world ----->

the scholarly community debates the claims around the new knowledge, and the claimant defends the claims persuasively until the proposition stands or is

modified through discourse ----->

the artist-researcher goes ardently back inside the experience, impelling the next step of acknowledgement.

## Experiment

Anyone who has ever developed an art project in a studio is familiar with these accounts of experiment and changefulness. This is why so much of an artist's knowledge always makes sense first as altered experience, as some inextricably *embodied* pattern of feelings on the move. The know-how that arises in the studio is immersive and nervous, more implicit than explicit. But for all that, the studio-savvy is no less a form of knowledge than some other, more critically distanced mode of knowing. Anyone who has spent time muddling in a studio knows the value of this embodied savviness, this sense of delicate conviction in their bones.

(A quick explanatory note: obviously a 'studio' nowadays is not necessarily a set-aside room. It can be an online facility, a network or even a laptop computer. For the sake of brevity, I will continue to use the word 'studio' in this essay to signify the 'place' where the artist-researcher conducts the iterative, rigorous processes of experimentation which lead to new work and enhanced understanding.)

Given that the worldly value of scholarly research starts and finishes with how well and how widely any discovered batch of knowledge is communicated to a robust, discursive community of peers, how then can the artist-researcher's implicit insights and emergent understandings best be brought out and put about in the form of explicit and useful knowledge? Indeed, how much of an artist-researcher's energy should be expended on this question? Isn't the exhibition of the work sufficient? Why do some academics (me included) insist that language—be it spoken or written—is presently a necessary component in the robust and effective transfer of knowledge?

My first answer stems from my recent experiences with government actuaries and multi-disciplinary committees. Accounting for the dynamics—informal as well as formal or policy-governed—of these powerful rulemaking bodies, I think it is currently imprudent to ignore the prevailing realpolitik. To say it plainly, I can report that scientists and most politicians are stunned and angered by artists' brusque assertions that no linguistic accounts need to be appended to the outcomes of an experimental process. The scientists tend to offer a sincerely testy riposte: "So, there's no need to write up our laboratory exercises—we should just let people visit the labs and everyone will understand all the nuances of what's being discovered?" In the next breath, they usually say that it is in the struggle to synthesise the lab-data into verbal propositions and evidentiary justifications that the crystalline and mind-changing precepts emerge. As one scientist said to me, 'first we have to learn how to manipulate things, then we have some chance of manipulating concepts, then we have to show what conceptual complex we can make from everything we have learned to manipulate.' At which point I can't see myself winning any argument about artists demanding some privileged exemption from the demand for verbal disquisition and debate-based defence of knowledge-claims. There may come a time when a sizable

portion of our society can sense and accept an artwork to be speaking directly and unambiguously to them in that particular artwork's own argot. Indeed most artist-researcher's work to bring that time closer. But I feel the need to say this pragmatically, respectfully and strategically: now is not that time.

The second answer stems from my own experience as an artist-researcher, thirty years of which persuades me that although an exhibition might be an effective enough means of offering propositions to a small and stringently selected community of peers, there are undeniable benefits associated with the cognitive ordeal of hauling out and translating the implicit knowledge from one set of semantic and affective structures over to a linguistic set. This is because the explication coerces in the artist a series of cognitive shifts inside and outside the palpable and cerebral memories of the studio experience. In other words, the act of linguistic explication exhorts the artist-researcher to oscillate between seeking the insider's ethical authority, derived as it is from studio-founded conviction, and achieving the outsider's stance of critically distanced disquisition, wherein the validity and efficacy of claimed knowledge can be challenged and endorsed in extensive discourse. The linguistic explication does not 'decode' the work. Rather the explication opens an arena for debate around the knowledge that has been synthesised and proffered both in the work and in the linguistic account. Thus by appending explicit oration to implicit know-how, the artist can cobble the doubled consciousness that Andre Gorz cherished at the end of his life with Doreen.

Why am I so confident that it is a beneficial ordeal to produce a linguistic explication of what gets learned within the ebbs, flows and pulses of artistically led research? The answer lies in the fact that artists typically investigate and shape dynamic circumstances. As they go about their work, artists experiment with raw matter or time or relationships amongst people, things and tendencies. In doing so, they can generate and convey knowledge about change. Usually this knowledge is tacit, unspoken, un-analysed.<sup>1</sup> Conducting experiments to bring change to matter or to moments, artists work in the midst of complexity, therefore, catalysing mutability and making decisions about the best ways to find form within it. In experiments conducted in order to develop a work, the artist negotiates complex relationships of initiative-and-repercussion. Meanwhile, in the world outside the artist-researcher's studio, complexity defines everyday experience evermore emphatically in our globalizing economies. Given that most experts agree that complexity can be understood only by *experiencing it directly*, by imbibing and appreciating it from inside the systematics of its always-unfolding occurrence, then it follows logically that artists are specialists in this major aspect of contemporary life.<sup>2</sup> In short, complexity needs to be investigated by means of a special, doubled mentality—a means of being fully attentive both inside and outside the unfolding phenomena—and artists are potential leaders of research concerning this paradoxical capability.

Herein lies a great challenge to all contemporary scholarship. Most of our inherited disciplines in the humanities, the social sciences and the sciences all espouse the dispassionate assessment of carefully distanced objects. But all around me now I see cultural phenomena and interactive relationships that are not objects, not stable or amenable to modelled analysis, not susceptible to distanced appreciation. Instead I see

networked and interactive phenomena that are complex, dynamic, relational, ever-altering and emergent. I see computational projects. Online projects. Projects thriving on feedback from participants. These projects define my culture. But my traditional disciplinary training is only partly useful for participating in and appreciating the definitive qualities of such phenomena. Or more precisely, I understand that I need to fossick amongst the extant disciplines in order to fashion some protean and involved ability, something that is rigorous but also engaged and not distanced, something that gives me a chance to understand what I'm in when I am creating or encountering artworks that resonate truly to the slippery, relational quickness of contemporary experience.

Why do these interactive, immersive and ever-emerging works matter? They matter because they give us a chance to sense *directly* how complexity works. As the Canadian artist David Rokeby observed in his crucial essay, 'Transforming Mirrors', many contemporary artists make dynamic, interactive and immersive installations nowadays in order to create *relationships* rather than *finished artworks*. Like artificial ecologies created for close study, such artworks are heuristic systems and research environments. Such artists set up emergent systems that 'reflect the consequences of our actions back to us' (133).

When you encounter these artworks (think of Rokeby's great interactive work, 'The Very Nervous System', for example) you get a feeling for the endless flux and paradoxically patterned unpredictability that are always coursing through the lively portions of the world. Such works encourage you to understand how you and the world are in and of each other, how you and the world are constituent of each other and mutually obliged, how you and the world are implicated, therefore, not distanced. Such artworks can help you experience renditions of the complexity that plays out when individuals, their environments and their communities insinuate each other. And by experiencing it, you have the chance to know it, to know it in the manner that is appropriate to complexity.

Appropriate, how? Paul Cilliers is a philosopher specialising in this dynamic field. He explains that 'complexity cannot be reduced to simple, coherent and universally valid discourses'. Not stable or objective, complexity emerges and evolves systematically but unpredictably. To know a complex system, Cilliers observes, you cannot reduce it to a static, schematic model separated from yourself, because complexity is relationally involved and always adjusting. If complexity is frozen, it loses its definitive dynamism and ceases to be complexity. So you have to *experience* a complex circumstance. Which means you have to get inside it, thereby diminishing your critical distance from it. And then you must *make a continuous narrative report about what is going on*, always keeping account of how the system is altering each moment you're involved in it (see, Cilliers 130, 10).

The urgency to understand the dynamics of what Cilliers calls the 'constrained diversity' (127) of complexity has strengthened with the arrival of networked, interactive cultures and globalisation. Which brings us to the nub of Cilliers' and Rokeby's theses about the most effective way to know the dynamics in the contemporary world. If you participate in a complex system and you want to

understand what is happening within it, then instead of producing a schematised blueprint or a critically distanced snapshot that freezes and distorts experience into static representation, you need to generate *an involved set of narratives* that account for the changes and encourage speculations about the endless dynamics of the system. Infiltrating the experience in this way you become not only a witnessing participant but also a diviner, someone who begins to distil some brittle definitions about the tendencies that are pushing through the system. Never actually predicting what will happen, never proclaiming that you have modelled any permanent templates underlying the system, you learn to propose ‘what if’ scenarios about the imminent and volatile future. You broaden your scope of *readiness* therefore, having developed the ability to be responsive to several possibilities surging out of the situation. You delve inside the system whilst also maintaining, quickly and restlessly, a reflective vantage on it. You put yourself both inside it and outside it. Although these two modes of cognition are consciously distinct, they need to be occurring *almost* simultaneously, firing off each other so that you can experience a kind of intelligent shimmer arising in an optimal state of acknowledgement which the design theorist Donald Schon calls ‘the action-present’ (62). In that shimmer you have the chance to describe the system’s poised tendencies in such a way that you can then momentarily grasp your hunches about those tendencies and you can cross-reference these hunches against your historically constructed understanding of your own habits, desires, capabilities and states of readiness. Thus you get a skittish, analytical understanding of how you and the world are dynamically implicated.

So, while you are observing and describing what happens within such complex circumstances, the system makes its own momentum even as it also reflects back to you the consequences not only of the world’s stimuli but also of your particular actions. In other words, as soon as you sense how the system is tending, instantaneously you also analyse and re-analyse this ever-adjusting tendency so that over time, in the accrued account of the continuous dynamics of your own involvement, you get the best possible understanding of the ultimately imponderable workings of the system’s complexity. Such an account of experience is a kind of research report leading to knowledge and wisdom but never to certainty or prediction.

For Cilliers, none of the characteristics of complexity are especially tractable to analysis, for the ‘object’ under analysis is altering from moment to moment and is not really an object therefore: ‘a complex system is not constituted merely by the sum of its components, but also by the intricate *relationships* between those components’ (2). If we map those relationships as an active network, ‘any given narrative will form a path, or trajectory, through the network. ... [and] as we trace various narrative paths through it, it changes’ (130). Thus, when we compile the narrative reports about what occurred inside the system, we accrue the best sense of how the system tends to go. The best sense—unreliable, uncertain but also ‘divinable’ as one tracks the flow of tendencies.

How similar is this experience to the artist-researcher’s daily business of experimenting in the studio! As Cilliers explains, if we pause to consider the flow of action-and-reaction in such an experience, we find that our ‘analytical method destroys what it seeks to understand’ (2). Or, as William Wordsworth declared in

1798, ‘we murder to dissect’ (377). Thus we need to treat all discernible patterns as momentary sets of contingent principles in motion; then we have to take those principles *into* the boisterous environment, knowing that these precepts will soon fail or need adjustment. Once we sense those failures and adjustments registering in our analytical faculties, we are momentarily stalled again, proposing another batch of contingent principles which we then take back into the system to see if they help us understand how all the dynamics are tending. Such is a good session in the studio.

Inside—but also outside—but also inside—but also outside—but also inside. The rhythm of this narrative acknowledgement is restless. And it’s necessary. Because the world of lived experience and discovery-based research is restless like this, not simple, static or stable. Being thus immersed and extracted, involved yet also critically distanced, ill-disciplined and shifty but also disciplined and reflective—as in an artist’s studio—you stand a chance of knowing both the world and yourself more comprehensively, not only more intuitively but also ... and there’s no denying that this seems enigmatic and illogical ... not only intuitively but also more analytically. Regardless of whether we are scientists, writers or artists, this doubled and paradoxical access to knowledge is the re-disciplined capability that we need for finding our way through today’s complex and changeful world.

Walter Benjamin, in his essay on ‘The Storyteller’, recalls an old German axiom that can be translated as something like: ‘when you have gone on a journey, you have a story to tell’. Benjamin explains that narrative prevails as our best means of accounting for experience (see, Benjamin 1969). Drawing from a life full of details (not only from his or her own life but also from a composite made out of the lives of all storytellers and their characters who have gone before), a narrator offers a web of insights about the tangle of causes-and-effects, actions-and-reactions that occur when someone ventures into a particular experience in a world of interconnecting contingencies. Like Doreen’s knowledge in *Letter to D*, the authority of a compelling storyteller comes across to the audience as a *conviction*, something grounded and ethical in its *persuasiveness*, rather than merely whimsical or dourly discursive. An authoritative account is a version of the world that seems to have been deeply experienced, lodged in the sensorium, known more in the bones than in the mind. At least the narrator’s knowledge is implicit this way until it is explicated through the offering of a story that gives a report about the main, significant factors that impel the world that is being rendered in the tale.

So too, when you have been in the studio, you have a story to tell. You have journeyed into experience and you have an account to offer about how the heuristic processes of *acknowledgement* proceeded through action and repercussion. This story of what happened in the making of the artwork is additional to the work that you can exhibit. Think of this account as a research report. It is the explication of what has been learned and earned as you survived the experience; it is the means whereby a scholarly community can be formed and all the tacit know-how that has been accrued in the creative process can be made somewhat communicable through language.

Once this communication has been proffered (accepting that any explication is really just a propositional flex of thought rather than a perfectly comprehensive translation

of the artwork), then discourse amongst a scholarly community becomes feasible, because interlocutors can share language in order to contend with the outcomes of the research. In the best of cultures this discourse occurs not only in words but also in other artworks. In the best of cultures, we would be adept at extracting maximum intelligence from both modes of enunciation: from the aesthetic as well as the discursive. And we would all be confident to draw on both.

And here is my concluding adage, which I offer on the basis of my experiences in studios and my investigations in books and conversations:

Artist-researchers have the chance to woo two modes of knowing: the implicit and the explicit. They have the chance to entwine the insider's embodied know-how with the outsider's analytical precepts. The attraction between these two modes of knowing must be both felt and spoken. And as the world blooms in the artist's consciousness, the mutual commitment of the two modes can abide and provide.

At our best, we can set immersion and critical distance oscillating in a cognitive quickstep that takes us continuously and instantaneously inside and outside the dynamic experiences that we are always seeking to understand. Taking part in a national culture of research and education, we artist-researchers may not be working to our full abilities just yet. We may not have brokered yet an habitual union between intuition and disquisition. But it is something worth facilitating. And the marriage of these two mentalities really does seem, at last, to be imaginable and achievable.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> This notion of tacit cognition was well espoused several decades ago by Michael Polanyi. See his *The tacit dimension*, New York: Anchor Books, 1967. See also his *Personal knowledge: towards a post-critical philosophy*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1958

<sup>2</sup> See especially, Paul Cilliers, *Complexity and postmodernism*, London: Routledge, 1998

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