

# The generative and catalytic powers of creative, expressive arts in Action Research

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## Abstract

*Being conscious of how we know what we know, and equally conscious that when we come to such an insight that our ways of knowing are not necessarily the same as everyone else's, are increasingly essential aspects of methodological literacy. This competency is particularly so in Action Research arenas (Wicks, Reason and Bradbury, 2008) that can explore the natures of knowledge as well as the information that comprises the knowledge being produced in action. Such multi-dimensional inquiry is a characteristic of trans-disciplinary as well as cross-cultural inquiry in the Action Research field (Wright, 2011). This paper proposes that creative, expressive arts are affective (generative and catalytic) approaches in enabling this developing literacy to underpin knowledge construction practices in Action Research arenas. I also discuss the relevance of this form of praxis to the quality of future life on earth as framed by Tim Morton's work on "hyperobjects" (2013).*

## Key words

Creative and expressive arts, ways of knowing, ontology, epistemology, Action Research, hyperobjects, experiential knowledge, presentational knowledge, propositional knowledge, practical knowledge.

## The relevance of the enterprise

Here we explore the ways art, as an ancient and integral way of knowing, increases epistemological equity and our access to multiple ways of knowing. (O'Neill, 2012, p. 348.)

Coming into new understandings about epistemology and ontology, or other ways of knowing things that are other than the things we know, is a next step in being more critically aware of the semantics and psychologies of objectivity. In changing our relationship to this framework of thinking we can bring our subjective "self" into the voices of scholarship and social action as an active participant in research practice. As we subjectively make our knowledge claims we are compelled to sense our relationship with the knowledge we are claiming, rather than depend purely on another's authoritative account as affirmed in referenced publishing or instrumentally produced "evidence". These reflections are both personal and also social; requiring us to encounter our psychologies, cultures of language and listening, and the creativity of co-production of theory and practice.

The default language of "worldview" helpfully holds the place of "ontology", however the observation that knowledge is socially constructed rather than a material reality cannot be avoided<sup>5</sup>:

...I am going to look at epistemology as falling under three alternative worldviews or sets of experience or assumptions about reality. These are the **pre-modern**, which is predicated on the idea that "soul", "Spirit" or some construct of the "divine" is at the root of reality; the **modern**, which is predicated on logic or reason usually applied in ways that reduce the basis of reality down to materialistic formulations; and the **post-modern**, which is predicated on the idea that everything is relative (or relational) in a world where there are no ultimate predicates. (McIntosh, 2012, p.31)

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<sup>5</sup> It is important to note that Morton's thesis propels these alternatives for understanding knowledge into an altogether different relationship.

The distinction between a socially constructed form of knowledge to one that is materially “given” also changes our relationship to that knowledge – the epistemological question. One can observe the material form of a cup under certain conditions, but we cannot observe the intention to drink from it. Experiencing a similar intention and communicating what is experienced to another is how we know such things (epistemology). When we do, we know that knowable reality is more than material things; it is also our experiences of them (ontology). This is another way of knowing to those, who maintain that reality is only knowable through its materiality.

“When you say ‘other ways of knowing’ what do you mean?” is a question that frequently comes my way, particularly in the context of cross-cultural inquiry strategies which work with Aboriginal Australian and conventional western knowledge systems in research environments. It is a question that is an opportunity to open up sensitivity to appreciating and incorporating aspects of our worlds in ways that can be inhibited when we continue with the traditions of our own education. The relevance of this capability is the relevance of diversity.

Monoculture constrains diversity to increasing fragmentation within the tight boundaries of a knowledge system (Bourdieu, 1977), whereas heteroculture - particularly in the context of cultures of knowing - radically expands the lone pine, western tree of knowledge into a rich and varied forest. Not only does heteroculture release the tightness of the boundary of the knowledge system, a tightness that often has dire consequences for the people within and outside it; it also enables an individual and social knowledge system to become self-aware. In some ways we could say that this is happening in Australia now as First Nations people are increasingly participating in mainstream systems within their own terms and to some degrees vice versa. I can trace my own learning about epistemology through both my migration heritage as well as my encounters with Aboriginal peoples in Action Research settings.

When monocultures become self-aware, not only can they increase their own internal health; they can also inter-breed with other

cultures, and even die without losing the whole human battle, by becoming part of a resilient ecosystem for humanity and all life. As Wojciechowski (1975) pointed out “An intellectual construct always retains its noetic role” (p.111). A significant issue is whether we can encounter such scales and qualities of difference without projecting the horizontal violence that monoculture instils within us (Bourdieu, 1977).

Being aware and respectful of other ways of knowing, which is a key aspect of good Action Research practice (ALARA, 2012), is essential to the health of our inquiring minds and to broadening our human capacity to meet difficulty with understanding, co-creativity and peace.

O’Neill’s quotation cited at the opening paragraph of this paper points to the value of the creative arts as a means of bringing us into equitable relationships with each other in our relationship with what we know. This is a strong critique of conventional western approaches to epistemology, which have bound into many of them presumptions of power *inequity*: academic qualifications and institutional ambitions create such hierarchies, as do the sometimes presumed relationship between a researcher and his or her so-called subject.

Being a co-producer of creative and expressive arts in research encounters brings the questions of power, silencing, risk and voice into the foreground. As the paintbrush gingerly interrupts the perfection of the blank page so the person becomes known to himself or herself; we are compelled to consider our relationship with what and how we know as we depict the idea in our minds, how little we know and the threats of punishment and humiliation from the powered-up conventional knowledge system, for being so.

Action Research was established in part, to redress this issue, repositioning the human subject as an equitable partner in the research arena, which in turn raised new questions about what it means to be a researcher and a subject in this situation. This commitment to redressing inequity in knowledge production increases epistemological equity in the direct inter-relationships of

an inquiry community as well as the ripples that their inquiry generates. Epistemological equity can (but does not necessarily) produce multiple ways of knowing, that is if the methods used in a research strategy provoke and support such a turn in power to come about. Creative and expressive arts in this context are a way of loosening up the grip of what we think it is “to know”.

This is not art for arts sake, neither for entertainment, nor for therapy though any of these rewards can also be enjoyed along the way. Working with the media of creative arts in research environments is directly related to the business of inquiry and knowing. They are of particular value in Action Research approaches because unlike other methodologies and epistemologies, Action Research has the capacity to interrogate its own epistemological and ontological assumptions. A commitment of Action Research is to improve the condition in which participants are living or working as an aspect of problem solving through which new knowledge is created and validated. Sometimes it is within the ambit of the research initiative, as it explores the dimensions of the problem, to inquire into the very foundations of what is known about a particular issue, and interrogate the philosophical assumptions that underpin those foundations.

When focussing on creative, expressive arts, I am valuing the use of artistic media involving aesthetic interaction with human senses as we interact, reflect, make meaning and produce artistic objects and events. I am not discussing the value of performing or being an audience for artistic works authored by others (pre-existing songs, choreographies and stories, for example). The value of facing the blank page or the lump of clay is essential to my premise. The value of being an audience is, for this paper, a different mode of engagement and action.

My argument is that creative and expressive arts can break with conventions of knowing, reveal the knower to ourselves and each other in the act of knowing, lead us to unexpected questions, and usefully introduce clarity by revealing and contesting hidden assumptions of power about what there is to be known. Theoretically, I propose that such media enable us to understand

experiential and presentational knowing (Heron, 1996, pp. 52-61), to generate new knowledge in these forms. If carried out attentively, practitioners using creative and expressive arts can provide a rigorous and innovative foundation for propositional and practical knowing.

## **Beginnings**

The South Australian Attorney General's Department in 1991 commissioned my first full-scale participatory Action Research strategy. The inquiry was to look into the background to youth crime prevention. As one of the department's project officers stated at the time that: "we ignore, control, neglect and punish children up until they turn twelve and then wonder why it is that they turn against us when they enter their adolescent years". The project inquired into "the meaning of family violence to young people", a project title with double entendre invoking a study of family violence involving young people rather than children, as well as the meaning of this abuse to young people.

As the Participatory Action Research (PAR) facilitator, I assembled a strategic research group made up of some fifty youth workers from youth services and domestic violence workers from domestic violence and rape crisis services located in the city of Adelaide. These two sectors had not come together before, and the questions that the inquiry strategy was raising had not been asked before.

At a workshop early into the first stage of the research strategy, I wanted the lived experience of family violence to young people to be brought to the foreground of the participants' collective gaze. This was so that we could move beyond the objectivity of policy and crime statistics and expose ourselves, human to human, to what it was that young people were experiencing.

One of the youth workers had referred to street poetry as a place where first-hand experience was being described, and introduced me to a young man who was living on the streets and busking with his poetry. He agreed to perform his work to the co-researchers at the workshop.

When he entered the government office room, fluoro-lit and some twelve floors above street level, his very presence was an act of self-expression in itself. When he recited his poetry, it was met with stunned silence. I was surprised that the people who were so close to the coal-face of the issue were affected this way. So powerful was his presence, his words and his unrestrained anger and grief in his recital that we lost several co-researchers from the project. Their reflections were that they had been “unprepared” for the assault, which made me wonder how they related to the knowledge of the issues they addressed in their policy and service provision.

I was an early stage researcher and perhaps had overlooked the reality that many service providers were survivors themselves, and while they had received the generally broadcasted information about the session, they had not experienced this kind of expression in the context of their work.

The publication “Restraint of Love” which presented the participants writings from the project included creative and poetic works from both the service providers and the survivors. Here is an example from one of the survivors reflecting on the value of their participation in the research project:

Life's no more a mystery that suffocates my will.  
I've made the choice to free myself,  
To start to feel fulfilled.  
I've struggled through the darkness of loathing who I am,  
To find my beauty buried deep, and bring it up again.  
No longer do I fear you, the evil that you wrought,  
The shame I carried through my life, the death I often sought.  
I've finished with the drinking and drugs existing brought,  
I see a person growing up and loving what she's taught.  
Life's no more a mystery, it's full of happy things,  
It's full with pride in who I am, not shame from hidden pain.  
(‘Joy’ [pseudonym] in Goff and Associates, 1998, p.50)

The use of poetry, creative writing and poetics influencing formal scholarly writing, has been a welcome development in sociological research for some decades. Consistent with my earlier assertion

about stepping away from the semantics of objectivity, poetics are a natural next step from refusing the institutional expectation of writing objectivity in the voice of the third person, and in its place communicating scholarship as a critically subjective self-expression. My early introduction to this development was in my postdoctoral research, through the work of Laurel Richardson (1997), who challenged the conventions of sociological writing:

For Richardson, language is neither irrational nor irrelevant, but the means by which truth is not only articulated but also given power to exist... She critiques how sociologists, who see themselves as social scientists, pay much attention to the language of the people they study but virtually none to their own (Richardson, 1997, p. 39). She critiques her peers as submitting to “institutionalised behaviouristic assumptions” about writers, readers, subjects and knowledge itself (Ibid, p.42) and in so doing overlooking that “how one writes one’s theory is not simply a theoretical matter. The theoretical inscribes a social order, power relationships, and the subjective state of the theorists” (Ibid, p. 49). (Goff, 2006, p.91)

Richardson (1997) coined the term “breaking genre” which is a practice of working in the new epistemological and ontological spaces that are formed when two disciplinary fields interpenetrate each other. In her text she brings the disciplines of literature to those of sociology, writing alternate chapters as a dramatic script describing a dialogue between the conventional and non-conventional forms of writing, interspersed with the real drama she experienced on campus with her academic peers, in their responses to her interventions. She purposefully exposes and deconstructs the conventions of writing sociologically in the interests of addressing what she sees as the self-contradicting diminishment of sociology’s responsibility to our human right to be nurtured, cherished and fostered (Richardson, 1997, p.213) in our “other ways of knowing” (Ibid, p.208).

In my research practices since, I have walked careful lines between objective and subjective semantics and poetics, seeking not to alienate an alienated readership while also inviting their engagement with the text in more than simply technical or



analytical terms. When working with Aboriginal co-researchers the point is often made that every statistic about health, crime or unemployment for example, is a real human life. In those research environments where emotional intelligence is needed on the part of decision-makers in order to support break-throughs arising from research practices, this approach to our scholarly voice can be both risky and effective. In accordance with Richardson's earlier work, French philosopher Jacques Rancière notes:

Political statements and literary locutions produce effects in reality. They define models of speech or action but also regimes of sensible intensity. They draft maps of the visible, trajectories between the visible and the sayable, relationships between modes of being, modes of saying, and modes of doing and making. They define variations of sensible intensities, perceptions, and the abilities of bodies.  
(Rancière, 2000, p.39)

## **Beyond words and towards images**

Some years after the research into family violence and young people, I had the great pleasure of working with an esteemed Aboriginal artist from the Noonghaburrah Nation. One of his methods when working with groups was group painting. He would prepare a canvas, about 2-3 metres in length and spread it across a table with paints, water and brushes. He would invite people around the table, and following a brief discussion about the issue being explored leave it to the participants to do everything else. He would sit quietly at one end of the table, apparently not doing much, as people self-consciously picked up the brushes and contemplated the white space. He would encourage them to begin by agreeing a background colour wash, which generally reduced anxieties associated with handling unfamiliar tools and media, while also enabling people to relax into the meditative and conversational spaces of painting together. Once the background colour and perhaps the size of a border had been agreed and committed to canvas, people had a chance to think about the images they wished to paint.

There are many ways to go about this – individual images, a group scene, abstract patterns, planned - or whatever comes. Sometimes images were only worked by their originator, sometimes people added to each other's creations and the relationships between them. The border space could provide symbols to read the central image with, or be simply decorative patterning. Depending on the situation, the painting process can be a central focus for a group of people to discuss the research question. Alternatively, or on completion, a group can reflect on what has been created, opening up how people see an issue, or an element of it, surprising themselves and each other with what the act of painting brings up.

I see O'Neill's insights about epistemological equity being evident in the shared commitment of imagination to material image, and shared unknowing that this act creates. The act of interpretation of the idea to the crafted image requires us to "come around" the knowledge (idea, memory, feeling, image) in our minds. Drawing a still-life requires us to decide what the curvature of the apple actually is for us to move the pencil one way or another, for us to know this curvature and share our way of knowing this way, with others:

The perception of art objects... relates to types of human involvement in real or unreal, past, present, or future states of the world. Types of **world encounter** are thus brought to presentation, through which types of **encounter with world encounter** become possible. (Seel, 2005, p.113) (Author's emphases)

I have used the group painting technique in several research and learning situations, for example:

- A one-off workshop involving some 130 school-based educational professionals exploring the meaning and dynamics of collaboration.
- A one-off workshop with a not-for profit organisation whose 13 team members needed to reaffirm their team relationships and the meaning of resilience in the context of high stress and staff turn over.

- A sustained participatory Action Research strategy into health promotion in the hands of Aboriginal early childhood educators involving some 40 people over 18 months of inquiry.

Each situation is unique of course, and the suggestion of using visual creative arts as the mode of engagement needs considerable dialogue with the commissioners and the participants. These details of context and dialogue are an aspect of methodology that need to support the chosen creative arts approach.

The not-for profit organisation held a 3-hour workshop in a retreat-style of location with the ten or so team members and their supervisor. They had received a flier prior to the workshop outlining the approach and inviting them to think about images that a) expressed their core nature as a person, and b) described their experience of change in their work place. They were free to ignore this pre-session invitation, to use it, or not, when they came to the workshop. It was a way of helping those who felt challenged by the idea of a painting session not to be paralysed by the blank canvas.

When people entered the room, they found it divided in half: I had set up the familiar electronic white board with a semi-circle of seats for dialogue work on one side, and on the other a large table with an equally large blank canvas, paints and brushes waiting. Following a briefing about the workshop, participants moved over to the table and were invited to fill in the background colour, then to paint images of their experiences of change. I stepped back and watched, refreshed the water jars, and notated with their permission, some of the dialogue that evolved around the table.

Here are some of the images they painted, and their comments about their experiences of change:



*Figure 1: The room, the images of change, in the moment of doing. Photographs by Susan Goff with consent of participants*

Change happens in many different rates and scales of growth – each person has their own experience of change, and together people create a very diverse reality – reflexive responses are deeply varied...” (Participant reflections on their image describing their experience of change in their workplace - Facilitator’s notes)

I then invited them to walk out into the natural bushland around the retreat facility and to find something concrete that symbolically expressed the relational gifts that they uniquely brought to each other and as they had discovered in the painting exercise. On returning to the workshop they were invited to glue their items onto the painting, at any place on the canvas where the relationship between their gift and the image of change that had already been painted, appeared to be strongest. We then sat in the semi-circle and using some theoretical frameworks about resilience we organised their insights into established management theory (e.g. Boxelaar et al, 2006; Morgan and Morgan, 2008), which I had simplified into table form. This was for use by their supervisors so

they could incorporate the workshop results into good practice supervision in the context of developing resilience in teams.

My reflection on this delivery is that the actual experience of painting and what it produced for the participants in terms of affirming themselves and their relationships was good work. The epistemological equity experienced in imaging and expressing their experiences of change was the means by which the team collaboration was affirmed. What remained slightly mystifying was the importing of the participants' insights into the established management theory, which required the supervisors to think critically about their supervision practice and to change it on behalf of their team. It is not that they did not wish to, it appeared to be more that they did not know how to and my responses to their questions about this, following the event, were unable to bridge that gap.

The participatory Action Research strategy into health promotion and Aboriginal early childhood education was a large-scale, state-wide initiative with the intention of national implementation. As with some of my other works, this project required two disciplinary fields at operational and managerial domains, to come together for the first time. This project had the additional complexity of cross-cultural engagement between the participants (Aboriginal multi-Nation professionals and Torres Strait Islander professionals), between the participants and the research strategy facilitators (Anglo-Saxon and Maori), and the research community and the funding body (Indigenous owned organisations, sector peak bodies and mainstream public sector).

The first six-month stage involved monthly learning or yarning circles, working with the two organisations who had agreed in principle to the project and the proposed approach that we submitted in our tender. This gentle strategy allowed us to listen to each other, and for the central governance group, made up of purely Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals to scope the research; the principles by which the project would be governed, to learn about each other's fields, and to set the terms of reference for the literature review. An indication of the eight themes follows:

Theme 1: An understanding of what “Health Promotion” is as understood by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and practitioners

Theme 2: Comparing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander understandings of health promotion with diverse and mainstream understandings

Theme 7: The “whirly wind” form of Action Research

Theme 8: A postcolonial form of accreditation and quality framework (Goff, Reedy and Jones, 2009, p.13).

These questions came from the indigenous governance group, reflecting on their knowledge of the current state of the field we were inquiring into. The literature had to be drawn purely from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander authorship, including unpublished or grey literature. The result was a significant and very unusual review, which the group read and had to find a way of assimilating to produce a conceptual framework with which to govern the Action Research strategy. This included who should participate, how to organise and interpret the data arising from reflections on practice, and what quality measures needed to be developed to make the whole enterprise culturally safe and strong.

We agreed a painting workshop would be a way to carry out this assimilation. The participants gathered around the canvas and over a period of some hours, yarning through the literature review as they did, they created a group artwork.



*Figure 2. Assimilating a literature review through group painting and yarning. Photograph by Susan Goff with consent of participants*

The resulting artwork remained a powerful icon for the whole project. Without going into all the detail, the painted image holds within it icons that for the group identified the key qualities the project needed to deliver as substantiated by the review in the participants' terms. This was not an analytical interpretation so much as a felt distillation of what had been learned with long histories in the field; continually contextualised by the harsh realities of infant and maternal deaths, disease and poverty in the peri-urban and more remote locations that the participants worked, and the severely reduced life expectancy of Aboriginal men and women.

We carried out several other group painting sessions, including at the subsequent two-day workshop inviting an extended network of Indigenous academics and field practitioners together to co-design the research methodology itself. This enabled the collaboration, including the strategy facilitators (ourselves) to work to and build on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals'

experiences of Action Research. This approach in a large scale and ambitious project gave participants voice, by providing a form of expression and communication that avoided the use of English and its colonising history, which was also wound into the problems we were addressing in the project. As before, once complete the participants reflected on the images they had created and informed us of the principles and approaches they wished us to take, as had come to the surface through group painting.

## **Sound, movement and performativity**

Other creative dimensions that have proved powerful in inquiry are voice and mime.

One of my favourite media is the collective “hum”. This is particularly useful for large group work – twenty or more people – and I have used it in gatherings of several hundred.

The invitation is to start a “hum” which I usually do with a microphone, and people quickly join in, then I stop for them to continue without the intrusion of an amplified level of sound. The beauty of a collective hum is that it allows everyone to hear himself or herself in the midst of everyone else, without having to be self-conscious about being tone deaf or not knowing the song or the words. There are no words and the song is as it naturally becomes as people expend their breath, and pause to breathe in and hum again. Once the tone has been established, people can increase their enjoyment and confidence and get experimental: they lift and lower the volume and the communal key of the hum, enabling the sound to become a thing in itself – a kind of “crowd-sourcing” of breath, heart, mind and body. It continues for as long as it needs to and comes to its own perfect conclusion. At the end there are usually smiles, looking around, quiet reflections on what it means to be a part of something, and sometimes to wonder at the innocent beauty of who we are together. I have found it to be a delightful way to begin a large-scale process – and equally, to end one.

Theatre is perhaps the most ambitious of creative arts and self-expression because it incorporates so many creative modes of



expression at once and requires a level of innovation and confidence that is not easily available to everyone. Mime is a way of overcoming the anxiety of the chosen word, which one might live to regret, while at the same time moving self-expression into a whole embodied, and kinetic form. Additionally, it can involve many bodies working together in space, adding to the appreciation of spatial relationships, boundaries and their meanings<sup>6</sup>.

I have used mime where an inquiry session has come to a brick wall, where words and rational thinking fail. At the moment of genuine “not knowing” we can gently move into feeling and how that feeling can be expressed metaphorically in movement. A metaphor can be a sequence of represented events as in a story or narrative, or it can be as a living sculpture.

In the mid 2000’s I was invited as a Fellow to support a postdoctoral research retreat in the United Kingdom. The students were reflecting on their progress and considering the roadblocks that they were each confronting. At one point, I was invited to comment, and rather than commenting I invited everyone up on their feet suggesting that they could each take turns in enacting the road block that they saw in each other’s work, as a form of critically reflexive feedback. Everyone stood in a circle and each person took turns, nominating the person whose work they were responding to.

This exercise remained resonant for some years with people revisiting the reflections that they were given by their trusted peers, almost as a benchmark from which to work and complete their research. I recall one mime at this event where a person showed the careful building up of an imagined form from the ground, like a potter working with air, to produce something very beautiful and fragile, then enacting smashing it to pieces and watching it fall to the ground. This mime was reflecting back to

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<sup>6</sup> This understanding of performativity, inquiry, spatial relationships and kinetic learning is given full form in the therapeutic “Constellations” methodology of Bert Hellinger ([www.hellingerpa.com](http://www.hellingerpa.com))

one of the participants about their tendency to destroy their careful and beautiful work, asking the question “why?” they did this.

My most recent adventure in creative arts and collaborative inquiry (but not Action Research) was at a two-day symposium, exploring the performativity of institutional authority in water management<sup>7</sup>. I had recently returned from a team project visiting Australian Aboriginal communities in the Murray-Darling Basin, affirming individual intellectual property ownership of 480 multi-Nation narratives; which individuals had contributed to a government body as a form of consultative feedback about a draft management plan. The open-ended narratives were of such a high value that to limit their use to the strategic consultation was thought to be a waste and a transgression of trust. However if the material was to be re-used for other purposes, the institution had to seek ethical consent from each submission-maker for archiving it and reusing it within agreed terms.

Teams of Aboriginal and non-Indigenous consultants re-visited the communities that had produced the original submissions, and with the assistance of Aboriginal “town facilitators” attempted to relocate the submission makers some 18 months after the initial engagement. Once the town facilitator had found the person, and reached agreement regarding meeting the team members, a two-person team visited each person in the location of their choosing. In the interaction we “performed” an agreed process to inform the person how their submission had made a difference, to formally thank them, to explain the nature and value of the database that their narratives had helped create, and to negotiate an agreement regarding the re-use, or otherwise, of their material.

For the symposium I decided to write a script with some members of the team. We read it as a play reading, performed with background slides that provided tangential references timed to provoke critically reflexive thinking in the audience. Our tone of

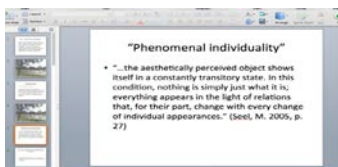
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<sup>7</sup> I acknowledge the Systemic Governance Research Program and the Performance Research Unit, Monash University, (“Knowing Water: policy, performance and practice” 27-28 August 2013).

performance was flat, as our intention was not to entertain, or to persuade the audience about the benevolence or otherwise of the institution’s enactment of authority. Our intention was to provoke the audience to fill in the space between the deadpan reading, the tangential slides and the inquiry into institutional performances of authority in the context of water.

Slide	Performance	Text
Slide 1: Title Phenomenal individuality in the performance of authority	Introduction Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school	Suggestion: Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school.
Slide 2: Title Phenomenal individuality in the performance of authority	Introduction Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school	Suggestion: Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school.
Slide 3: Title Phenomenal individuality in the performance of authority	Introduction Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school	Suggestion: Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school.
Slide 4: Title Phenomenal individuality in the performance of authority	Introduction Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school	Suggestion: Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school. Welcome to the first session of a course in a secondary school.

Figure 3. The script, the reflexive prompt, the room - Elements of performing authority in water governance



The small group discussion that followed revealed the breadth of responses including “how utterly boring”. Here are some samples:

- Authority for “guilt by association”
- A face value consultative process
- Ultimately a futile exercise – a question of power – pulling responses through words
- An attempt to do something but nothing can be done without structural change
- A distressing show of power
- A provocation
- Byzantine in its complexity
- Structured etiquette (reference to Goffman) – deference and demeanour, a ritual structure

- Powerful aesthetic – what you notice – a gracious relationship between ethics and aesthetics
- A praxis of love – bringing forward the legitimacy of the other. (Workshop feedback notes, Goff 26-27/8/13)

The beauty of this exercise was that creative expression was not in the scripted representation that we read which was merely a reference point: it was in the openness of us as a performing team to the responses of the participants to that reference. The fact that the responses were so varied was evidence to us that our approach had enabled people to make their own sense of it. I see this uncertainty, authentically shared by the performers and the audience, and provoked by the original transactions and their representation in the performance as all of us experiencing epistemological equity.

With regard to Aboriginal rights to the crucial issue of water – but in fact to all aspects of life in Australia - this is living drama, including how it is enacted, perceived and utilised, and crucial to Aboriginal cultural resilience and innovation. The question we were pointing to was this: Was the performance of institutional authority, as carried out by this particular government body, an intervention in colonisation and thus a participant in decolonisation, or was it further entrenching the neoliberal (new) colonial project? (Arabena, 2007) In the context of this question, the audience with more or less awareness, was participating through aesthetic engagement in decolonising research which in its very nature requires epistemological uncertainty and openness to multiple ways of knowing:

Decolonising research methodology, to me, must represent a process that not only reaffirms suppressed forms of knowledge, but also produces discernable indigenous models of research that integrate a broadened circle of diverse ways of knowing in a global and postmodern age. (Hamza, 2004, p.130)

## The relevance of creative and expressive arts to theories of participatory knowledge construction

By asserting that perception, phenomenologically considered; is inherently participatory, we mean that perception always involves, at its most intimate level, the experience of an active interplay, or coupling, between the perceiving body and that which it perceives. Prior to our verbal reflections, at the level of our spontaneous, sensorial engagement with the world around us, we are all animists. (Abram, 1997, p.57)

Readers may be familiar with Heron's "extended epistemology". Now more than twenty years old, it is still powerful in its ability to awaken us to how we think about knowing. Heron proposes a model of "holistic knowing":

...which holds that propositional knowing, expressed in statements that something is the case, is interdependent with three other kinds of knowing: practical knowing, or knowing how to exercise a skill; presentational knowing, an intuitive grasp of the significance of patterns as expressed in graphic, plastic, moving, musical and verbal art-forms; and experiential knowing, imaging and feeling the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process or thing. (Heron, 1996, p.52)

Abram's understanding of the participatory nature of aesthetic activity (further developed in Seel, 2005) underpins Heron and Reason's proposition about how we come to know. Our encounter with knowing begins with experiential emersion of more or less consciousness, and when we notice what we are experiencing we too create form, pattern and connections between the things we notice. We may then express what we are seeing (learning, intuiting) as creative expression – not necessarily "artistic" but an early and original assimilation.

It is here, in these first stages of coming to know, that creative arts gives us media to work within and through experiential knowing to presentational knowing. They can do this in a manner that allows us not to default to habits of thought, but to let the unconscious rise to our inner gaze. The materials and practices

themselves lead us to unexpected insights. In collaborative inquiry environments we do this together, witnessing ourselves in each other, building a form of community around the beauty and surprise of coming to know. This movement of affirming the sociology of knowing was evident in the group painting work described here, in one instance healing a team and generating its own unique approach to building resilience; in the other affirming inter-cultural governance of inquiry approaches and directions to address the life depleting consequences of colonisation. Creative and expressive arts in Action Research make it possible for us to experience Polanyi's (1958) understanding that in the end it is up to us as to how to know what we know, and to know that we do.

Heron and Reason developed their model further (1997, 2008) latterly inter-relating it in practical details of inquiry cycling through Action Research practices of reflection, action and their outcomes. Lincoln rounded the story of the extended epistemology to incorporate the work of others - feminist theorists who understand how gender plays a role in the construction of knowledge; race and ethnic research, which recognises the impact of marginalisation on knowledge construction practices as a consequence of race, history and language; and through Heron and Reason's work on the Extended Epistemology model (Lincoln, 2001, p. 128).

The challenge for Action Research practitioners in cultural contexts that are unfamiliar with Action Research, or even unfamiliar with knowledge as compared with "information", is the need to make knowledge construction transparent in order to afford participation in knowledge construction. It is up to practitioners to communicate the meanings and relevance of epistemological and ontological awareness at the point of research commissioning and throughout the endeavour, dwelling as we do in Polanyi's moment of ultimate personal knowledge.

People ask me why we need to mention the "O" and "E" words at all - do people really have to know? The focus on problem solving can limit inquiry to technical and analytical forms of engagement, often mimicking the preferred cultures of encounter in the

commissioning organisations. Being a good cultural fit is important, but not at the expense of the inquiry's purpose.

My suggestion is that creative arts and self-expression are effective ways to solving this issue; if in Action Research practice the questions you address extend to how people know the issue, what their relationship to this knowledge is, and how this knowledge informs their idea of what there is to be known in their world. The answers to these questions are steps towards enabling competency in co-inquiry practice and knowledge construction practices, including those which breach preconceived limits to knowledge and research. They are also key to enabling not only literacy in the crafting of knowledge, but embodied nimbleness in understanding and dissolving the brick walls that impede transformation.

The choices we make about what we reflect on, what we forget or avoid or just don't know, how we re-assemble our reflections, and how we connect them to each other in familiar or novel ways, become the means by which we move ourselves from blank to populated canvas, silence to hum, stillness to mime, muteness to articulation. It is these choices that are the basis for participation.

Moustakas's (1990) treatise on heuristic research was a quiet benchmark in tracking this process. He describes how a researcher travels through initial "engagement", then on to "incubation" where the researcher retreats from the experiential phase to concentrate on the experience; then, "illumination" which allows tacit knowledge and intuition to generate a breakthrough in consciousness; "explication" when we work detailed understanding and explanations into our knowledge production work; and finally "creative synthesis" that underpins the creative expression of what the researcher is perceiving as an insight.

Moustakas's proposition is foreshadowing Heron's experiential and presentational dimensions of knowing, which he also suggests are essential to the work of inquiry and knowledge construction. He talks about the need to continually return to all the traces of the heuristic approach in order to validate the resulting conclusions, referencing Polanyi's (1969) assertion that making a truth claim associated with a research finding is ultimately a judgement made

by the scientist in a moment that is unsupported by evidence or rationality. It can only be a reflection of the researcher's worldview and his or her approach to knowing. If our worldview is out of keeping with the world that is forming around us, we need ways to release ourselves from our habits of knowledge as part and the research practice. Creative arts and self-expression are a powerful means of doing so.

A more recent theorisation about how we come to know is Senge et al's (2005) text "Presence" which described a "U-Theory" or a movement from sensing to "presencing" and realizing (p.88). The movement is described as a "U" because it begins in the outer world of observing and "becoming one with the world" resonant of Heron's experiential knowing and Moustakas' "engagement", then dives into the depths of inner knowing, akin to Heron's presentational knowing and Moustakas' stages of interior knowing, to bring something new into reality (Senge, et al, 2005, p.91). The authors emphasise that this is not a planned action but a "natural flow", the theory circles around a continuous question: "what does it mean to act in the world and not on the world?" - a question that evokes O'Neill's (2012) concept of epistemological equity and accessing multiple ways of knowing.

If we slow the process of coming to know down, as Moustakas, Heron and Reason, and Senge for example suggest, then we can become aware of our own particular sense of knowing ourselves and our world: whether for example our playful child-self picks something off our neurological shelf, or our wise sage-self is claimed by some flow of thought that never originated within us. As Bohm suggests (1992) we continually reconstruct the thought that flows through us to fit our current sense of being in the world. He illustrates this representative in the example of how we think about a rainbow (ibid, p.107-8):

It seems to be an object made up of coloured arcs. That's the way you experience it. But according to physics there is no rainbow out there. And if in fact you assumed the rainbow was an object and walked towards it, it would not be found... the rainbow is not a coherent object... it doesn't have being as a bow; it has being as a process of falling rain



and light refracting. The rainbow is a representation ...  
[that] was probably produced in people even before words.

As with our previous reflections (Richardson, Rancière) Bohm goes on to state that how we talk about and how we think about things affects how we see them, and how we see them affects what we see. Thus it is that the very earliest stages of coming to know, and how we think about what we know (the patterns we make), and how we express what we know in material form – creative, exploratory and otherwise – is crucial to the state of the world we are in. It is human thought that has produced the age of the Anthropocene; we are only just coming to realise this and the implications for participation in inquiry as being discussed here.

## **Creative and express arts in Action Research into the age of the hyperobject**

The dimension of this realisation regarding human thought is powerfully and originally expressed in Morton's workings on the subject of "hyperobjects" (2013). His theory is that we are now in an age, where human thought activity has created impacts on the earth that are so far reaching in time and space that they are impossible for us to know - and yet we are inescapably held within them. They intimately hold us within them and we can never escape them. As a consequence of their arrival and our emerging ability to see them we have lost our aesthetic distance, a measure that is essential for coming to know anything within the western industrial sense of knowledge and its rebellious post-industrial children, at least. This inescapable intimacy reverses the conventional notion of a human being standing outside an object in some fictitious neutral location to observe it. Morton's insight, frequently explicated through the artworks he cites, utterly transforms the relationship between the knower and that which we know, including what there is to be known.

His obvious example of a hyperobject is that of climate change – the extent, dimension, dynamic and duration of which is beyond human capacity to know in our inability to escape from it. It reaches into every aspect of our world – a rain drop falling on our head, the food we eat, looking out at the day and so on. He

includes plastics, oil and non-human entities such as black holes as other examples of hyperobjects. There are particular criteria that define a hyperobject<sup>8</sup> which are somewhat complex and distracting to detail here, but his theorising clearly shows that not all things can be understood as hyperobjects even though hyperobjects engulf all things.

Morton suggests that the world has already come to an end, twice. The first time was in 1784, with the invention of Watt's steam engine beginning the production of carbon pollution and its layering across all life systems for an unforeseeable amount of time; the second was in 1945 with the explosion of nuclear bombs layering radiation into all life systems, a layering with a lifespan of some 24,000 years at least (p.5). Until these two interruptions, humanity had a chance to know the planet as a coherent world – however, and because the extent of these hyperobjects is so vast, the very notion of a “world” as conceived in Greek philosophy for example, has become extinct.

We are in a new age of ecology, wherein we are condemned to be in the midst of a perpetual and accelerating state of inevitable ignorance, suspended in the grasp of these rampaging giants. This state of affairs was foreseen by Wojciechowski, (1975) who produced 25 laws describing the internal dynamics of knowledge ecologies, which included the characteristic of increasing speed and scale of knowledge, increasing open-endedness of knowledge with increasing mass of knowledge. He saw knowledge as being of human beings and separate to us and in this sense as well as many of the laws, resembling Morton's concept of hyperobjects.

In this now finite state of being, our relationship with what we know, who we are as knowers and what there is to know are inquiry questions the relevance of which have taken a quantum leap in their intensity (Rancière, 2000). Artistic and self-expression in human inquiry has a tough task to fulfil:

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<sup>8</sup> They are: viscosity, nonlocality, temporal undulation, phasing and inter-objectivity.

We need art that does not make people think... but rather that walks them through an inner space that is hard to traverse (p.184).

Going beyond Bohm's observations of our representation of rainbows, Morton says:

An object fails to coincide with its appearance-for another object, no matter how accurate that appearance for... Existence is fragile inconsistency. Every object exhibits this ontological inconsistency, but hyperobjects make it especially obvious. A tornado is not global warming. A mountain is not planet Earth.... A child is not the biosphere (p.196)... yet they are (p.199)

In conclusion, he points to an eventual calm of acceptance of our co-existence with hyperobjects - a kind of sociological entropy that we might consider to be peace, or hell. As we see our reflection of ourselves in our vast footprints across the globe we have met our match in the scale of the hyperobjects we have created, and that have a life of their own. So powerful is their presence that they are contacting us (p.201) even through that which we don't know we don't know (a state which Morton refers to as the "withdrawal" of the hyperobject).

In this astounding reconstruction of the fundamental elements of existence; self-expression of our denial, anger, grief and eventual acceptance are perhaps the only means by which human inquiry can become the vehicle that melts our separation from the earth and brings us into its hyperactive heart. As Morton clearly presents, it is the creative arts in the Action Research of how to be, that enable us to encounter such departures from all that we are familiar with, bringing us into co-existence with our new family members. This is a very different way of knowing, and relating to knowing, taking form in a world of very different composition to anything that we can call on. In such moments of ontological incomprehensibility, creative arts in Action Research are fundamental to our survival:

It is simply that we shouldn't leave ontology to scientism. Otherwise we end up with some New Age head-shop, lava-

lamp ontology that defaults to a reductionist atomism.  
(Morton, 2013, p.15)

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