

Working in the Field of Artist-run Initiatives:
watching, listening, and feeling

“Life is one big field trip. Isn’t it? That’s my job, to keep my eyes open, to keep taking photographs and keep taking notes.”
 Ryan Gander (interviewed on ABC Radio National, 9 June, 2015)

Fieldwork is a term that has a long association with the social sciences, especially anthropology. Traditionally to do fieldwork means studying, understanding and engaging with a culture not one’s own, which often means spending time with the ‘other’ culture, immersed in their day-to-day life. But fieldwork also recalls working in the field to produce crops and food; to nurture and grow something, vegetables, fruit or trees. Today, many artists too are utilizing fieldwork to make artwork, although for artists the term is strongly associated with research, usually outside the studio, working amongst it, gathering information or inspiration.

In this paper I will explore how, in the course of my own project, I came to understand fieldwork as the *work* of art. This is different from fieldwork as a way to gather information or material in order to make an artwork *after* the work done in the field, either alone or in collaboration. Fieldwork, I argue, can be both a method and mode of inquiry that is the *work* of art, which may differ from the artwork as final product or object. Taking my own practice-based research project *The Cultural Economy of Artist-Run Initiatives in Australia* as a case study - and in particular the project “Following Amie” – the paper explores how understanding fieldwork as the *work* of art necessarily emphasises the process itself thus creating what Tim Ingold describes as ‘knowledge’ through ‘making.’ Fieldwork or working in the field in this project draws on both the anthropological sense of ‘fieldwork,’ in particular Tim Ingold’s writings, as well as fieldwork as social practice, through current thinking about socially engaged art.

I begin with a brief discussion of social practice or socially engaged art (SEA), as it is highly significant for my own project.¹ If, as Pablo Helguera writes, socially engaged art “exists somewhere between art and non-art, and its state may be permanently unresolved,” then my own practice-based research project exists at an intersection of socially engaged art and practice-based research. Its position is also unresolved, constantly shifting between an art practice and a research project; an enquiry and a

performance. For socially engaged artists “fieldwork” has a particular relevance where emphasis is placed on deep engagement with social exchange, public space and “inhabiting and even producing a space of encounter.” (Purves, “Meet the Chair”)

Social practice² has many historical threads: some cite Joseph Beuys and his social art, as one thread in a broad cloth; others point to the significance of early DADA, and then continuing in the 1960s with minimalism, conceptual process art, fluxus, happenings and importantly forty years of feminist art agitation. For Pablo Helguera, “what characterizes socially engaged art is its dependence on social intercourse as a factor of its existence.” (Helguera 2011: 2) Helguera points to another important aspect of socially engaged art and that is the distinction between “two types of art practice: symbolic and actual.” Thus he relegates as ‘symbolic’ the traditional canon of Western art, which he considers relies on representation. SEA on the other hand is a practice that intervenes in the actual world, in public space, seeking to create not only a meaningful experience as one would have at the theatre, but rather direct social action that is “engaged with the world in an active way.” (Miranda, “How the Art of Social Practice is Changing the World, One Row House at a Time”)

For socially engaged artists, engaging with the world beyond art spaces and artworld concerns is an important aspect of their practice. Rather than engaging with questions of form and aesthetic judgments, or even philosophical questions on the nature of existence, SEA artists are engaged with social and political issues and concerns. Given the outward-looking nature of this practice, it would seem at first glance that my project, investigating ARIs, is an inward-looking project, concerned with a narrow artworld concern about artists’ spaces and artists’ experiences, and so would not fit into a social practice framework. And in many ways this may be true. My project does not work with people in a different ‘world’ than my own. And the social concerns of artists’ lives are not a pressing social concern for the majority of the population. However, I take a broader view, and perhaps an idealistic view of the role of ARIs and why they matter, not just for artists, but for the potential good they offer for a truly democratic society where art is one part of a rich culture of expression and action and not the preserve of a few or an elitist practice that keeps itself hidden in obscurity. And it is this way of viewing the role of ARIs – as more than simply spaces

of exhibition – that motivates my research and the social practice that emerged as I engaged with artists and ARIs in the field.

The ARI project as social practice and ARIs as a site for fieldwork

In order to understand my fieldwork with artist-run initiatives or ARIs, I need now to provide background on my research on ARIs and elaborate why I consider them a place for social practice and site for fieldwork. In my project I'm primarily interested in artists' experiences of being involved in artist-run initiatives. I am interested in what role ARIs play in artists' lives and how that affects or reflects art practices. What matters most deeply for artists and most importantly what are the social and cultural implications for making art in this sector?

The starting point for the research is my own involvement in and reliance on, as a practicing artist, artist-run initiatives. I consider them very important spaces: to show work, to meet other artists, and to continue engaging in questions around art practice and philosophies of art. Many people, including artists, misunderstand them as only 'incubators' for emerging artists. I consider this a very narrow and limited view of the actual and cultural place that current ARIs play in artists' lives both young and emerging, as well as older more established artists, and certainly a limited view of their potential. Showing one's work, finding a public or an audience is the lifeblood of any practice and this is one of the important functions that artist-run initiatives can play for artists. But I also understand that artist-run initiatives are not simply spaces of exhibition, nor simply starting points for early career artists learning their trade – they can also be understood as important public institutions in what Bonnie Honig calls "holding environments" for art communities, where they make space for a range of activities and events that activate and sustain artists' lives, shape discourses and gather diverse publics.

The art market used to be the benchmark that anointed an artist as valuable and worthy. And of course the art market is still one pathway that an artist can take to gain respect and find a public and with a bit of luck, monetary success. However, this is no longer the only option for an artist. And ARIs play a significant role in releasing artists from this traditional relationship. One of the big shifts that has occurred over the last twenty-five years is the growth in the number of artists graduating from art

schools and art programs which in turn has created a larger number of practicing artists, and larger numbers of people engaged in art as makers and audience.³ (Gladstone 2014: 27) In a recent survey report, commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts and conducted across Australia titled *Arts in Daily Life: participation across States and Territories*, it was found that “over nine in ten Australians, across all states and territories, are receptively engaging with the arts by attending arts events or reading.” The report shows clearly the enormous increase in numbers of people involved in the arts across Australia indicating that art is no longer seen as simply an elitist exercise nor something that people feel is “not really for people like me.” Accompanying this expansion are now artists who may *only* show in artist-run initiatives or independent galleries and spaces, choosing to work and live within a local arts environment or community. Chris Kraus has referred to this resistance to central authority or the pull of the international art centres as ‘radical localism.’ In a short text titled *Kelly Lake Store and Other Stories*, Kraus describes an artist space on the US Mexico border, Mexicali Rose, that has created a compelling and exciting art/media/community space for local artists in the town of Mexicali:

... instead of leaving, they have chosen to practice a *radical localism*, privileging authentic relationships and shared experience over dislocation and competition of the international art world. Exiled from its power bases – like Mexico City, where artists are fully enmeshed in the international grid – Mexicali artists are resolutely aware of their opportunity to remain in their own community and assert an alternative ethos. (Kraus 2012: 38)

Radical localism is a good term to describe what most ARIs do in Australia where creating a space for art and artists is always a local act, answering a local and located need. ARIs can be seen as an expression and response to the place they are part of. And they can enable art to become part of local communities at the ground level. It is this shift in the position of ARIs that I am most interested to explore through fieldwork.

Once considered ‘alternative spaces’ and initially the product of radical ideologies about art and its site of exhibition – artist-run initiatives have now evolved into something else. This ‘something else’ was clearly articulated by the “Institutions by Artists” convention, held in Vancouver in 2012, along with the eponymous publication.⁴ As Lorna Brown clearly outlines in the preface to *Institutions by Artists*, ARIs have evolved into significant institutions for artists and audiences, “By creating

infrastructures through which to make, exhibit, teach, and learn about art, as well as to critically evaluate art's social and economic conditions in contemporary culture, artist-run initiatives continue to influence the methods and practices of museums, galleries, universities and cultural industries.” (Khonsary and Podesva 2012: 2)

Given the long forty-year history of various forms of artist-run initiatives in Australia I would argue they can now be considered as belonging to the public domain, as a public institution, along with public galleries and museums. This “public-ness” takes the form of an implicit understanding between artists and publics that confirms their worth and value, and ongoing presence and position as a longstanding organisation within the arts ecology of Australia.⁵ I will elaborate briefly on the significance of publicness and what Honig calls “public things” because it is the publicness of ARIs, or their position as a ‘public thing,’ that makes them an important area for research and as a site for SEA.

Public Institutions and Democracy

In writing of the importance of public institutions for a healthy democracy, the political theorist Bonnie Honig borrows the term “holding environment” from British psychoanalyst D. W. Winnicott, to argue for the importance of public things for a ‘healthy’ democracy.

Public things are, we might say...part of democracy's ‘holding environment.’ Efficiency is one value in a democracy but it is not democracy's only or regnant value, at least not for democracies that are, as Winnicott might say, ‘in health.’ In health, democracy is rooted in common love for and contestation of public things. Without such things, citizenship in neoliberal democracies risks being reduced to repetitive (private) work...and exceptional public emergencies. (Honig 2013: 59-60)

Honig argues that public things, including institutions, play a vital role in keeping democratic practices alive and healthy. They are there “in plain sight” when we need them. Drawing on Winnicott's ideas of the transitional object and its role in childhood development, she outlines a powerful argument for the vitality of objects and their significance to human world-making, providing us with stability and form. According to Honig the value of public things does not lie with efficiency, profit or other instrumental values, rather their use value is a human one, which values relations between people and things as well as “collaboration, spontaneity, joy, health,

creativity, pleasure not compliance, love but also rage, anger, and self-surprise.” (Honig: 63) Honig’s argument is significant for my own understanding of the importance of artist-run initiatives as places where artists can engage with a community of like-minded people and where values such as the above are valued.

In other words, what drives my social practice with ARIs is a sense of their social and political significance - not just as spaces for showing experimental art, but rather as spaces for the possibility for experimenting with social ways of being together, making together and experiencing life as an aesthetic experience, in the Dewey sense of the word. (Dewey 2005) Where once Allan Kaprow left “galleries, museums and professional arts circles for woods, alleys, public bathrooms, and supermarket aisles” (Kaprow 2003: xxviii) today – in a reversal of sorts – it is the small ARIs that can sometimes be found in woods, alleys, garages and other everyday and odd places. They are sites for a different sort of experiment, suggesting potentials and possibilities for ways of living, for enacting “diverse economies” (Gibson-Graham 2006: 59) as well as diverse socialities, and thus pointing the way to what J. K. Gibson-Graham, two feminist political geographers have called a ‘post-capitalist economy.’

This diverse economy of ARIs contributes to why I understand them as a place of social practice, so let me expand briefly on that. In *The End of Capitalism (as we knew it)* Gibson-Graham suggest that *how* we think about concepts such as ‘capitalism’ and ‘neo-liberalism’ has a powerful effect on how we create and imagine other possibilities – in particular the possibility for living in, what they call a non-capitalist world or even a post-capitalist world – where caring for each other and the environment around us are important values. Gibson-Graham’s thesis is not simply aimed at imagining new ways to live beyond capitalism, rather they reconsider how to think about capitalism *itself* – by looking at existing models and ways of operating that already exist. For these authors capitalism is not a monolithic, totalised and inescapable system, as is so often imagined by political and economic writers on all sides. Rather, their thesis helps us uncover pathways through our everyday lives today, *right now*, (no need to wait for the Revolution) by changing not only the way we live but also how we think about economics and democracy. They teach us that capitalist relationships are a small part of the many diverse ways that actual people

live and work. And I would argue that the many different models by which artist-run initiatives work today in Australia, exemplify these ‘diverse economies.’

Following Gibson-Graham’s thesis of ‘diverse economies’ I was interested to explore, through fieldwork and social practice, how to understand ARIs, not as traditional “alternative spaces” where “more radical” art can be experienced, but rather as spaces of sociality where different futures can be imagined through living in the present, or a sort of ‘preparing the way’ as Heidegger once wrote. According to the philosopher David Woods “preparing the way can be understood quasi-instrumentally, and then existentially and symbolically.” (Boag 2015) Like Gibson-Graham’s ideas that point to ways of imagining change through our everyday activities, rather than narratives of rupture and revolution, Heidegger’s philosophy, according to Woods, seeks to make change directly and indirectly through small actions “and doing ordinary good things that could lead to a tipping point...” (Boag 2015) These are the understandings that took me into the field.

Fieldwork as the Work of Art

In researching artist-run initiatives in Australia I found myself in the paradoxical position, as an artist, of researching art and artists through art, thus creating an ongoing question for the project: what does it mean for an artist to look more closely at their own community, a community of artists? As an artist researcher doing fieldwork I experienced a sense of being both near and far to the ‘object’ of research and this provoked a sense of how important my various positions were for the understandings I was developing – as Gabrielle de Vietri has elaborated in her performance lecture on ‘understanding’ and which I will return to below.⁶

Let me begin by describing my fieldwork. Every week I set aside time to visit galleries. I subscribe to every artist-run initiative in Australia and try to go to as many openings as I can. I take photos, record sound, collect ephemera and other material traces including sounds and video, and invite artists to have a conversation with me. I initially approached my fieldwork using participant observation. Participant observation is a well-known method used in the social sciences to understand groups of people and/or cultures. Guided by anthropologist Tim Ingold for whom participant observation is the most important method of anthropology, which he adamantly

distinguishes from ethnography, I began to understand how my art practice and fieldwork could work together – the fieldwork as one part of a multifaceted art practice. According to Ingold participant observation is “absolutely not a technique of data collection.” Rather, participant observation is a “way of knowing from the inside.” (Ingold 2013: 5) As Ingold cites, this accords with the new materialist theorist Karen Barad: ““We do not obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because “we” are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming.”” (Barad cited in Ingold: 5) So for Ingold there is no contradiction between participation and observation, rather they depend on one another. I came to understand that an important consideration of “knowing from the inside” when researching ARIs, is the essentially collaborative nature of the enquiry. And further that the fieldwork was an essential part of my art practice if understood as a collaborative form of knowledge making.

In a 2016 performance lecture given by Gabrielle de Vietri as part of MPavilion’s *Interval Performance Lecture Series*, “Between a Thought and a Feeling” de Vietri reflected on the troublesome word ‘understanding.’ She described how in Old English “understanding” referred to only *one* step in several that would lead to comprehension. The word itself developed from a spatial metaphor, where standing in a certain position allows the observer to get to know the properties of an object. In attempting to *understand* artists’ experiences of artist-run initiatives de Vietri’s reflections on understanding raised questions about my own position, especially as de Vietri intimates that ‘to understand’ one needs to take many positions. Where do I ‘stand’ in order to ‘understand?’ How do I get ‘under?’ to get to know the ‘object’ of my inquiry? But as de Vietri explains it doesn’t really do much good to be ‘under’ someone in order to understand them, rather one needs to be close or nearby in order to illicit sympathy and understanding, “to be in the vicinity of each other.” (de Vietri. web)

This sense of being in the vicinity or nearby in order to understand was an important part of my method of inquiry. For instance, as I worked in the field visiting spaces and encountering artists, as a participant observer, I began to experiment with different ways of being in the spaces and of understanding the spaces. Before long my own art practice and longstanding habits of making work, usually media artwork,

began to come into play, inflecting a more anthropological version of participant observation. In previous projects I had worked with the idea of performative encounters as an art strategy in public spaces. In the project [*Talking About the Weather*](#), with my art collaborator Norie Neumark, we had used performative encounters to “collect breath in order to blow back global warming”. The project was a ‘pataphysical intervention into the public discourse around global warming, where we purported to collect breath by stopping people and inviting them to simply breathe, drawing attention to the act of breathing and its connection to the air around us that we all shared and that was part of us all.’⁷ Over the course of several years we made a series of works creating performative encounters with strangers in public spaces.

For the current project, as I ventured out into the field on a regular basis, it was not clear where ‘research’ and ‘performance’ began and ended. More than previous works this project unfolded in the field as I worked on it and moved from observer to maker. In fact the relationship of thinking and making that was unfolding for me can be understood through Ingold’s theories of ‘making.’ For Ingold “making” creates knowledge. Ingold understands “thinking” and “knowing” as part of “doing” and “making” – one comes to understand and know things through a process which is also a process of self-discovery. Early on in Ingold’s book, *Making*, he writes,

The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of knowledge, let alone of understanding. Things, as proverbial wisdom has it, are easier said than done. It is, in short, by *watching, listening, and feeling* – by paying attention to what the world has to tell us – that we learn. (Ingold 2013:1)

My field trips and field research – visiting artist-run spaces – have become a process of “watching, listening, and feeling” as I’ve tried to “pay attention” to the artists and the spaces that make up the networks of artist-run initiatives. In this way the fieldwork and the art practice began to blur into each other as I continued to visit, listen, watch and feel, and to explore this through different practices and forms.

Following Amie: an art of inquiry

“In the art of inquiry, the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work. These materials think in us, as we think through them.” (Ingold 2013: 6)

For Tim Ingold the art of inquiry is about going along a path, his terms are “wayfaring” or “alongly,” a neologism he coined to capture his concept of inhabitant knowledge. “Inhabitants then know as they go, as they journey through the world along paths of travel. Far from being ancillary to the point-to-point collection of data to be passed up for subsequent processing to knowledge, movement is itself the inhabitant’s way of knowing.” (Ingold 2011: 154) Inspired by Ingold’s ideas on knowledge as an ambulatory journey, I decided to apply this to my fieldwork, especially as my ongoing fieldwork involved, above all, a movement between galleries, artists and projects.

The idea of expanding the fieldwork to include *following* as a new form of inquiry or method, emerged while in the field. From the start of my project I have been conducting a series of interviews with artists across Australia involved with ARIs. The interviews serve multiple purposes. First, they have enabled me to meet other artists involved in ARIs and to introduce myself and my project; and they have allowed me to ask direct questions rather than follow the more casual rhythms of conversations that I have with artists in the spaces and galleries. By inviting artists to be interviewed I was able to gain permission to record our conversation, thus adding to my accumulating collection of archival material.

The interview, however, is only one method of inquiry and there are many limitations to its efficacy for understanding. One of those limitations is the formal relationship set up between the interviewer and interviewee, where the set of questions asked have a significant effect on the answers. If as de Vietri has outlined ‘understanding’ is a spatial metaphor that necessarily entails ‘standing’ in different positions in order to understand, then the interview as method can only be one option. By the time I met the artist Amie Anderson, co-director of The Food Court, I had conducted many interviews across Australia - almost 40 - and I was searching for a more creative approach to the research, one that would allow for different understandings, different stories. *Following* as a method of inquiry presented itself as a new possibility and way to create a different relationship with ARI artists – different watching, listening and feeling. It was a way, as Ingold would have it, of entwining collaborations.

Proceeding along a path, every inhabitant lays a trail. Where inhabitants meet, trails are entwined, as the life of each becomes bound up with the other. Every entwining is a knot, and the more that lifelines are entwined, the greater the density of the knot. (Ingold, 2011:148)

The Food Court

Melbourne Docklands is a suburb of Melbourne very close to the CBD and once the busy industrial docklands of a bygone era. Today it is a canyon of concrete and glass with high-rise buildings competing for views of the shimmering waters full of expensive yachts. The Docklands is the result of aggressive ‘urban renewal’ and has been criticized for its ‘developer-centred’ approach. This has left the area with a lot of high-rise but very little else. The *Docklands Spaces* program was a response to this criticism and the ongoing problem of empty retail shops – as the people of Melbourne stayed away from the area in droves. In 2012 *Docklands Spaces*⁸ was commissioned by City of Melbourne and Places Victoria as a pilot initiative by Renew Australia to activate some of the under-utilized spaces “through incubating short-term uses by creative enterprises and independent local initiatives on a rent-free basis.” (Docklands Space online) Out of this program emerged three significant artist-run initiatives. *The Front*, directed by Deb Bain-King, *D11* initiated by Michael Carolan and run by Second Collective and *The Food Court*, co-directed by Nico Reddaway and Amie Anderson.⁹ From 2013 to 2016, when all three spaces closed¹⁰ I visited these spaces regularly and attended many openings. One of the interesting things that I noticed on my visits was the warm camaraderie between the artists from the different spaces, nearby. They all knew and liked each other and talked about each other’s work and projects, and they encouraged me to visit the other spaces while I was ‘down there.’ As one artist said, “We look out for each other.” The artists involved in the Docklands spaces gradually formed connections and friendships, through being in that place. As one artist said to me, “it can be pretty lonely down here during the day when no-one else is around, it’s good to go and chat with the artists in the other spaces.” And another artist mused, “We’ve become very close, there’s no rivalry – we’re such different spaces we’ve each got something different to give.” The spaces often opened on the same night, an intentional strategy to encourage people to visit the Docklands with the promise of seeing two or three openings and performances on the one night. This also created a crowd of people who

strolled from one gallery to the other, crossing the courtyard where sometimes performances spilled out into the large open piazza.

It was at an opening at *The Food Court* that I first met artist Amie Anderson. *The Food Court* space is literally an abandoned food court. It is a large open plan space with huge glass walls on two sides. It once housed several fast food outlets, which, if you look up at the ceiling, one can still see the stainless steel vents and other contraptions associated with ovens and air vents. One corner of the capacious space houses stylish built-in furniture - a wood and concrete memory of abandoned dreams. Now the corner furniture sits beside a small shelf of art books and art magazines. As Amie related, the artists had deliberately chosen this space, as it was least like a white cube gallery. They wanted a space that was cheap for artists. And they envisioned it as a social space, run by artists for artists, yet open to an expansive vision beyond the visual arts to include music, performance, social projects and community exchange. They understood that the food court, acting as an unconventional art space had enormous potential. Anything could happen here and it did. And the food court is perfect for such ambitious dreaming, its glass walls can disappear completely opening it out to the large courtyard and lapping waters of the docklands. In 2013 Nico and Amie inherited the space from the artist James Wright and several others. Early on the other artists dropped out and the two remaining artists, Nico and Amie, found themselves with the full responsibility of running the space. They inaugurated a relaxed, open, inclusive and very exciting experimental and often unconventional program of shows and events. With a busy monthly exhibition program the space was used for workshops, film screenings, music gigs and parties, and artist residencies. Re-imagining the artist space as a social space meant offering free WiFi, a strategy for drawing people in to the space. Adding to this was Nico's distinctive coffee cart, a second-hand cart that she bought along with an espresso coffee machine - which she taught herself to use, offering delicious coffee and tea - a fitting feature in an abandoned food court.

Amie Anderson describes her own art practice as multidisciplinary, including social practice. She describes it as split between work in sculpture, installation, video on the one hand and performance and using her own body "as a conduit to filter" stuff, on the other. She is interested in everyday objects seeing extra-sensory elements in them,

even magical qualities. Amie is a graduate of the Victorian College of the Arts and like most of the artists I've talked to and interviewed Amie has several day jobs to support herself. One job is private house cleaning and an other is her work with Art Circle artists at Yooralla, a group of artists with disabilities. As an artist with a socially engaged practice, Amie considers her work with both *The Food Court* and Art Circle artists as part of her own social practice. In my research across Australia with ARI artists I found other artists also considered working in an ARI part of their social practice. And this makes perfect sense. SEA, as Pablo Helguera tells us, is engaged with the world in an active way, it is a practice that intervenes in the 'actual' world, and takes direct social action as opposed to symbolic action. Amie's work with Yooralla artists is a fascinating example of this practice. She has actively and creatively connected two worlds that don't often intersect – that of cutting-edge art with artists with disabilities. SEA projects, as written about by Helguera and other practitioners working mainly in public space, tend to involve large public projects, often needing a lot of support and funding, and involving many participants. In contrast Amie's social practice is an ongoing working relationship with both a small group of artists as well as an artist's space. The work is durational and local. Like Chris Kraus's discussion of radical localism, Amie's project is located in the place, the city, that she lives in, suggesting as Kraus remarks, "an alternative ethos." (Kraus 2012: 38)

But there were other reasons to follow Amie. Like many ARI artists Amie held several jobs. One of the most oft repeated stories that artists told me during the interviews was their lack of time and money. And this is well known and well researched.¹¹ Artists need part time jobs to make enough money to survive. For the majority of working artists, art doesn't pay the rent. Significantly, for Amie, it is her role as co-director of *The Food Court* that is for her the most important commitment. In fact she works part time in order to continue to make artwork and be involved with *The Food Court*. With so many artists telling the same story it became obvious to me that the working life of a contemporary artist was complicated, busy and divided. The romantic notion of the single-minded artist working alone in the studio and too 'artistic', 'imaginative' and impractical to manage real life was far from the reality of most artists' lives.

If I was to understand artist's involvement in artist-run initiatives and in particular the idea that their work in ARIs is part of their practice - I couldn't isolate the different activities that make up their life as an artist. To understand artists' involvement in ARIs, I reasoned, (and following Ingold) I needed to 'follow' their trail. Following Amie is intended to be only the start of a series of *following* works, where I will invite other ARI artists to collaborate through the method of *following*.



Amie Anderson on the tram on the way to her job with Art Circle

For Ingold in describing the 'art of inquiry' making and knowing become an experiment in the sense of 'prising an opening and following where it leads.' This sense of 'prising an opening and following where it leads' is exactly how I would describe the process of following Amie.

After an initial conversation we agreed to collaborate on a process that would entail me following Amie over the course of several days as she went about her usual activities – working, organising, making artwork –Amie explained that she worked several days a week at Yooralla with Art Circle and she also had a longstanding job cleaning a private house. Amie organised all agreements of consent from her workplaces and invited me to meet her at her house for an early start to her busy day.

It was agreed that I would follow her around with my iPhone on a Selfie Stick. And this is exactly what happened.



Art Circle: Amie and Stewart

The iPhone and Selfie Stick.

It's important to understand why I chose the iPhone and selfie stick, rather than a large professional camera. Firstly, I understand *following* as a method of inquiry and not a documentary. It is about documenting as *process*, not outcome, and therefore the low-res image and casualness of the iPhone make sense. The iPhone has many advantages for the sort of inquiry task that was needed. It is small and not too intrusive. It is also the easiest way to follow someone without being encumbered with large amounts of equipment. By using such a small device it allows for unexpected events, movements and unplanned activity. It's significant that the selfie stick is carried beside or away from the body, rather than hiding my face up against the lens, (as a more professional camera does) – it therefore allows for intimacy and a different sort of relationship with the people around me, and the person I'm following. As a media artist I have often used video in my practice, it's as familiar for me as picking up a pencil to make a drawing or to take notes. And as I have discovered in previous performative work¹², it can act as a framing device helping focus my attention when in the field – listening, watching and feeling, as Ingold would have it – as well as signaling to others that I am watching and both a participant and an outsider.

On that first morning as I followed Amie to the coffee shop for her morning coffee, juggling the iPhone and the selfie stick as we walked, sometimes side by side sometimes single file, Amie talked about her work with Art Circle. It was at this point that I started to understand that the fieldwork was both the research and the *work* of art. If this was the work of art, then the other more conventional ‘fieldwork’ methods were also the *work* of art. If as social practice theorists have suggested art can take many forms including creating spaces of encounter, the fieldwork that I had been doing was indeed multiple forms of encounter – albeit intimate forms of encounter, rather than large public encounters.

The sense of doing something unknown and unexpected energized the process. Neither of us had a clear plan of what to expect, or how to proceed. And this raised some questions for me once we entered Amie’s workplace. On arrival at the Yooralla art room where the Art Circle artists were waiting eagerly, we were greeted with a chorus of warm hellos. The room had lots of light and was a good size for the 7 -10 artists who worked there. Their artworks, strong and expressive, were pinned around the walls, drawing me in. Amie was greeted warmly and everyone was keen to get her attention, to show her something or tell her something that had happened since they last met. “Today,” Amie announced, “we’re going to The Food Court to continue working on our projects for the upcoming exhibition.” This inclusion of Art Circle as artists-in-residence, is one of the more unconventional directions that The Food Court ARI has opened up. By inviting artists who would not usually be considered part of ‘cutting-edge’ artspaces, Amie and Nico have expanded and opened out the space creating a space of encounter that is inclusive, rather than exclusive. On entering the art room and meeting everyone I was immediately faced with a dilemma, where should I point the camera? Should I focus mainly on Amie all day? Or should I include the people she worked with and the surroundings of her work? This is something we hadn’t discussed, and so it was left to me, holding the selfie stick, to make an intuitive decision.

Soon, I found myself on the bus heading towards the Docklands singing along with ABBA songs. At the Food Court everyone alighted and moved into the Food Court where Amie moved seamlessly amongst us, helping each artist to prepare their work-

in-progress. They had already been developing projects over a period of time and now they pulled them out and continued to work on them. We stayed at the Food Court for several hours as the artists worked on their projects, testing out various inventions. By mid-afternoon the artists were finished and the workshop was over so we all poured back into the bus to return to Yooralla, exhausted.

Initially I planned to take short two-minute sequences. However even this technical restraint shifted during the day. I sometimes found myself videoing for longer and longer periods, sometimes shorter, depending on the unplanned activity around Amie.



Art Circle at The Food Court: Amie with Laura and Geoffrey seated

Following Amie is a process work and very much an experiment in the sense that Ingold describes when he writes, “prising an opening and following where it leads.” On the second day I followed Amie to a private house that she had been cleaning for several years. In fact she had developed a very close and trusting relationship with the family and when we arrived was greeted as a friend rather than an employee. This second day was more intimate and quiet. I followed Amie around the house as she performed her well known cleaning tasks. If fieldwork is understood as working in the field where understanding is arrived at through paying attention, listening, watching and feeling, then *Following Amie* could be considered not only a work-in-

progress but a central part of my fieldwork where fieldwork is now the *work* of art. In other words the work that art does.

[“Following Amie, an excerpt” <https://vimeo.com/home/myvideos>]

Conclusion

In recent years fieldwork has become a common term for artists working outside the studio. It has become particularly prevalent for artists working from inside the academy in practice-led research where practice and research have become entwined in a rethinking of the possibilities of art practice, and a rethinking of how and what research and knowledge may mean. In so doing art practice has been re-imagined as a transdisciplinary and interdisciplinary project that can draw upon many and varied methods and disciplines, depending on the needs and directions of the project. To paraphrase Tim Ingold, artists follow along paths that unfold as they go. For my own project this has meant making and doing as I went along, respecting the process. However, an important aspect of this unfolding process, in the field, and one that needs considerable reflection, is that to work in the field presupposes that artists are working *with* others, be they human or more than human others. This is a significant shift away from the notion of the autonomy of art and the artist, where the artist is imagined as an individual creating or representing their vision alone – separate and singular. Fieldwork on the contrary suggests artists are engaging with the social and collaborative. In my research *Following Amie* is highly collaborative, and contrasts, for example, with previous art historical projects like Sophie Calle’s *Suite Vénitienne*, where Calle famously followed a man she did not know around the streets of Venice. In an update of sorts *Following Amie* shares the curiosity and desire to understand through ‘following’ yet shares none of the subterfuge or secrecy of *Suite Vénitienne*.

The question of the relationship between fieldwork and art practice involved, for my own project a recognition of the collaborative nature of the work itself and the understandings it brings forth. As I visited galleries and interviewed ARI artists I came to understand the necessity and the joy of collaboration. And this seems only fitting, given the collaborative nature of ARI culture itself.

End Notes

1. The terminology around this practice can be slippery. Pablo Helguera calls it “porous” and gives a provisional definition, preferring socially engaged art, or SEA, to social practice. His reasons are that social practice “obscures the discipline from which socially engaged art has emerged (i.e. art)” and insists that the practice not lose its position within art, even if uncomfortable. He writes, “Socially engaged artists can and should challenge the art market in attempts to redefine the notion of authorship, but to do so they must accept and affirm their existence in the realm of art, as artists.” (Helguera 2011: 5)
2. There is a large and growing body of literature on socially engaged art or social practice: see Suzanne Lacy, 2010; Mary Jane Jacob and Kate Zeller, 2015; Shannon Jackson, 2011; Pablo Helguera, 2010; Purves 2005.
3. Paul Gladston, writing in the art magazine *Broadsheet*, in 2014, writes of the enormous expansion of art production in the United States since WWII. Quoting the art historian Brandon Taylor he writes, “...during the early 1940s there were a mere handful of galleries exhibiting modern art across the whole of the USA with little more than twenty artists of any stature regularly showing work there. By 1986... the USA had over two thousand modern art galleries with around six hundred and eighty of those galleries and one hundred and fifty thousand artists of non-amateur status producing modern works of art located in New York City alone. (Gladston 2014: 27). See also Peter Anderson, for discussion of how counting the number of artists in Australia can be complicated and confusing. (Anderson 34-36: 2009)
4. *Institutions by Artists* is the name of an important convention held in Vancouver, Canada in 2012, accompanied by an eponymous publication. By “institutions” the writers and organisers sought to shift normalised understandings of “institution” away from a static, staid and essentially hierarchical idea of structure where “persons ‘pre-exist intersubjective attunement.’” In their opening essay, Jeff Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva draw upon Portuguese anthropologist João de Pina-Cabral to re-imagine the term institution, a once much maligned idea that avant-garde artists, and in particular those associated with alternative spaces, sought to resist. “Thus, by institution, he refers not to a staid organization or structure, but a process of shared intentionality carried out by persons, who being mutually constituted are in the process of becoming singular persons.” (Khonsary and Kristina Lee Podesva. 16-17: 2012)
5. In the 30th issue of *Runway* online art journal, (March/April 2016) the theme of ECOLOGIES explored artist-run initiatives as a significant part of the Australian arts ecology. see <http://runway.org.au>
6. In January 2016, Gabrielle de Vietri gave a performance lecture at MPavilion in Melbourne as part of the *Interval Performance Lecture Series*, “Between a Thought and a Feeling” billed as performances that “complicate the power dynamics behind the act of inscribing images, and question the idea of authorship in nonfiction representation.” De Vietri’s talk addressed the word “understanding” highlighting its complicated etymology. (De Vietri 2016. Web.)

7. For more about *Talking About the Weather* by Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda, see online documentation.

<http://www.out-of-sync.com/weatherwebsite2012/project.html>

8. *Docklands Spaces*. Commissioned by the City of Melbourne, MAB Corporation, and Places Victoria. *Docklands Spaces* is a pilot initiative by Renew Australia to activate some of the currently under-utilized spaces in Docklands through incubating short-term uses by creative enterprises and independent local initiatives on a rent-free basis. For more information on this project see: <http://docklandsspaces.org>

9. For more on *The Front* see: <https://www.facebook.com/TheFront424> .

For more on *D11@Docklands* see: <http://d11artists.wix.com/d11-ari>

For more on The Food Court see: <http://the-food-court.net.au>

10. *The Front* is ongoing as a floating entity dedicated to site specific, collaborative and participatory projects in public space.

11. There have been several important economic studies of Australian artists over the years. The most well-known and significant are two studies undertaken in 2010 by David Throsby and Anita Zednik, *Do you really expect to get paid? An economic study of professional artists in Australia* and *What's your other job? A census analysis of arts employment in Australia*, both commissioned by the Australia Council for the Arts in collaboration with Macquarie University. Both studies underline the precarious state of living life as an artist in Australia, where for instance the average income for a working professional artist, in 2009, was \$30,000.

12. See *Searching for Rue Simon-Crubellier*, Norie Neumark and Maria Miranda. 2006. <http://www.out-of-sync.com/searching/index.htm>

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