

Following Amie: the artist at work

A crucial method of this art making has been that of situating others and myself in positions of not knowing - open to surprise. Sasha Grbich, *Performative Encounters*.

Art and Work, a short tour

Traditionally artwork meant specific objects made by artists, like paintings or sculpture. And an artist's work entailed making these objects. This easy understanding of artwork and artist's work falters if you take into account the curious history of modern art. Since the very emergence of the dominant myth of the bourgeois artist-genius living in a garret there has existed at the same time other views of what art and artwork may mean, and in particular our understanding of the artist's work. Writing in 1884, at the height of the industrial revolution in England, William Morris, an early advocate for an expansive and practical view of art as a way of life, stated, "the human pleasure of life is what I mean by art." (Morris) He was a strong critic of the brutalities of the industrial revolution, especially its effects on human labour and the loss of meaningful work. Today Morris's ideas loom into view once more as we enter a post-industrial era where work is again a point of contention and hot debate - as manual labour disappears and machines and robots take over these sorts of tasks, and as the impacts of digital and electronic modes of working are felt across the labour market. This is the context for understanding the artist's work today, as art and artwork can include all of human activity.

Meeting Amie

In 2015 I met Amie Anderson, then co-director of The Food Court ARI. I had invited Amie to have a conversation with me as part of my project researching the experiences of artists involved with artist-run initiatives in Australia. In the course of our conversation Amie described her working life and the multiple jobs she did in order to survive. This story of multiple short-term jobs is a very contemporary story and one that many people, not only artists, are experiencing in our current age of constant 'restructure.' It's an era that has accumulated numerous descriptions: for some it's the de-industrialisation of the workforce, the financialization of the economy, the age of the precariat, or simply neo-liberalism, a term that refers to the ideology of market rule, where the 'free' market supposedly makes the *best* decisions and government, big or small, is considered bad for business so that any regulations are ridiculed, dismissed and sometimes outlawed. But probably the most familiar term for this new world order is the gig economy. And it is the gig economy that would best describe Amie's situation of juggling multiple jobs and 'gigs'.

Once upon a time artists and other creatives had 'day' jobs. This sharp separation between working for money and making works of art has blurred somewhat with the gig economy. With artists like Amie working in part-time and/or casual jobs that may also be considered part of their art practice – for instance, Amie's work at Yooralla with Art Circle, as well as her work as co-director of the ARI, The Food Court, which she also considers to be part of her socially-engaged art practice. This blurring of art and life and work and artwork is happening all around us yet there is little understanding of what it means for both artists and audiences. The project *Following Amie* set out to delve deeper into an artist's life today, as she lived and worked it.



Following Amie

While following Amie I entered her duration, I became attuned and in-step with her life. I sat on trams and trains with her, and waited on station platforms for connections. I walked with her through suburban streets to her next gig. I sat in the bus with all of the Art Circle artists as we travelled together to the Docklands and The Food Court ARI, singing gaily ABBA's tuneful "Money money money." To follow Amie through her life was an intense and bodily sort of knowing. And it is this sense of bringing close, and being close to someone else's life that positions the video as un-documentary. Unlike a documentary, the video and the project does not pretend to fully capture or witness Amie's working life, there is no narrative arc, or attempt to report on the facts, rather it is a material and bodily experience of the time lived and the very duration or the *durée* of its materiality.

Through the lens of my small iPhone 6 on a selfie stick I not only perceived Amie, but perceived *with* Amie.

Following and Followed

It often feels as if ideas appear out of nowhere. Perhaps it was something you read in a book last week, or a scene in a film prompts a new thought or perhaps just chatting with a friend. Ideas present themselves when they're needed. And this is how the method of 'following' appeared, while in conversations with Amie, it simply appeared. And it felt just right, fitting perfectly with Tim Ingold's notions of embodied knowledge as a movement in the world, a "trail-following."

The task of the wayfarer, is not to act out a script received from predecessors but literally to negotiate a path through the world... It is in following this path – *in their movement along a way of life* – that people grow into knowledge. (Ingold, 162)

The 'wayfarer' for Ingold is someone seeking knowledge and understanding by 'following' a path – and growing into knowledge. And this is certainly true for my own involvement and research aims. Yet, the idea of 'following' brings together both the singular act of following Amie with the sense of 'following a path.' And in this sense, for both of us, the follower and the followed, we were both 'following a path' separately and together, unfolding our own knowledge and understanding. In this act of following there were no well-laid plans, and so there was an unknowingness and unexpectedness to the action. It was open-ended and surprising. To follow a near-stranger around in their life can feel invasive and embarrassing. And this is certainly how it felt at first. For both of us. It felt a bit awkward.

The selfie-stick

It started almost casually with the agreement to meet Amie at her house to begin the day. I arrived early with my iPhone 6 and selfie-stick. I had spent some time over the weekend practicing with the selfie stick, but this in no way prepared me for the reality of pointing the iPhone camera at Amie. It felt intense and intimate. An encounter full of strangeness.

The selfie-stick was a key element of the encounter and the 'following.' This small practical device is usually employed to follow *oneself* in life. "Here's me at the restaurant;" here's me watching the sunset;" "here's me and my girlfriends" and so on. Rather than this mode of self-watching, the selfie-stick, in this project, turned outwards and became a tool for an empathetic relationship between us. Amie and me. I attuned to her and she attuned to me, through moving together, linked through the selfie stick, blurring her-self plus my-self and even your-self as viewer of the selfie image. Over time we relaxed and became used to each other and the selfie-stick by my side.



Following the Past: Sophie Calle follows her man

In 1980 Sophie Calle followed a man she did not know around the streets of Venice. She had met him briefly at an art opening one evening in Paris, where he told her he was planning a trip to Venice the next day. She immediately decided to follow him. The work titled *Suite Vénitienne* has since been published as a small artist's book where Calle tells the story of her "adventures" following Henri B. around Venice, in the style of a diary or a detective's report. And keeping with the secrecy and opaqueness of the project Henri B., the followed, remains anonymous to the reader.

In an update of sorts *Following Amie* shares the curiosity and desire to understand through "following" yet engages in none of the subterfuge or secrecy of *Suite Vénitienne*. On the contrary it is a highly collaborative project conceived between the 'follower' and the 'followed'. The work unfolded as a collaborative project, and highlights the enormous shifts that have occurred across the arts and society since Calle's project in 1980. It's not that Calle's project wasn't always provocative and controversial. Rather new questions have opened up about artists and work, very different questions from those posed by Calle in that previous era. By blurring the accepted rules of what is public and private, through her persistent and secret photographing of an individual man, Calle raised serious questions about the power of the public and private, and how we understand them. In *Following Amie*, different questions arose, questions that in some way hark back to the beginnings of Modernity. Questions that ask: what is art work? What is an artist's work?

References:

Ingold, Tim, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011. Print.

Morris, William, *Art and Labour*, Lecture, 1884. The William Morris Internet Archive, web accessed March 28, 2017. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/morris/works/index.htm>