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What if Donald Rumsfeld was right?: Art-derived knowledge as a known unknown

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What orders of knowledge are constituted through creative practice? For schools of art and design, this question can be a strategic matter relating to status and performance measures. It also remains an issue for theoretical consideration even after the acknowledgement of so-called non-traditional outputs in research definitions and metrics. The character of practice-derived knowledge has been repeatedly parsed and located on a spectrum ranging from the material and technical, through the classically analytical, and on into the quasi-metaphysical. Speaking of creative practice as a form of boundary thought—as something positioned beyond the ‘horizon of expectation’—bridges the traditions of the avant-garde and those of more conventional scholarly experimentation and discovery (Osborne 2011, p. 113). Speaking of it as ‘para-discursive dislocation’ or as ‘somatic performativity’ (Slager 2012, p. 35) leaves those tallying research outputs perplexed, if not antagonistic.

Occasionally, this succession of orders of knowledge runs worryingly parallel to the typology of knowledge posited by then-US Secretary of State, Donald Rumsfeld:

[T]here are known knowns; there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns; that is to say we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns—the ones we don't know we don't know. (Rumsfeld 2010, p. xiv)

Rumsfeld could be right, but in the wrong way. As a platform for boundary thought, for knowledge sought beyond the horizon of expectation, art deals with things that we know that we do not know. But creative practice sets aside Rumsfeld's suggestion that we may come to know them, instead treating unknowns as *persistently*, rather than the resolvably, unknown. Creative practice treats known unknowns and unknown unknowns not as successive narrative stages but, to borrow de Saussure's figure, as two sides of the same sheet of paper.

Performing and spatializing knowledge in the museum

In the Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, I recently encountered two manifestations of knowledge formation that are modest signposts on the path towards better knowing the unknown unknown.

German artist Oliver Thie is currently half-way through a two-year project: the *Live drawing laboratory* staged publically in the museum's exhibition space. It positions the artist, quite literally, at a mid-point between science and art, and asks, explicitly, which practice (or perhaps what hybrid form of both) will deliver the more effective knowledge. (Fig 1) For science, in this instance, knowledge is founded upon a specimen; a single Hawaiian cave cicada about 2mm long, secured in field research. A scanning electron microscope (SCEM) delivers a 1000 times magnification, a black-and-white digital enlargement, of the specimen. Empirical observation using a technical apparatus delivers data; the building blocks of knowledge.



Figure 1 Oliver Thie, *Live drawing laboratory*, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, July 2015. (Photograph: the author)

What knowledge is delivered? Better to ask, what knowledge is anticipated. The specimen is positioned within what Georges Bataille calls a restricted economy of limits, control and projects (Hegarty 2000, p. 72); one in which 'Science envisions subordinated things—only things subordinated in time to their results' (Bataille 2001, p. 125). The result sought is an extrapolation from specimen (a single iteration) to species (a representative class). A double magnification is in train: from 2 mm to 2 metres, from the singular to the categorical. (Fig 2)



Figure 2 Scanning electron microscope image of Hawaiian cave cicada, *Live drawing laboratory*, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, July 2015. (Photograph: the author)

The tool used—a scanning electron microscope—is a hyper-mechanisation of the positivist tradition; seeing better means knowing more. But the tool has a number of technical and conceptual anomalies. To deliver depth of field, its resolution is reduced by an order of magnitude. The specimen itself must be pre-treated to prevent the electron beam roasting it; adding rogue data and artefacts to inferior resolution.

This's goal is to address anomalies in the apparatus but also to counteract the amplification of the singular specimen into a species class. He seeks to work against the detailed specificity of the specimen in order to achieve the generic qualities of a species. Commencing from the scanning electron microscope data—a tiled mosaic of laser printer output—This will produce a drawing based on the specimen but amended, in consultation with scientists, to address technical anomalies while also generalising into a species type. This would be an idealised image that would be

more useful to knowledge because less anchored in the specific data of the specimen itself. (Fig 3)



Figure 3 Oliver Thie, Live drawing laboratory, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, July 2015.
(Photograph: the author)

This process is spatialized across the *Live Drawing Laboratory*, inviting a contrast between two exercises in the visual construction of the field of knowledge. But Thie's project is ameliorative rather than contestatory. He recovers the image for knowledge, or better, returns the image to a particular practice of knowledge.

However, this spatialized dramatization of knowledge, mobilized around art and science, is a two-way phenomenon. Adjacent to Thie's 'Live Drawing Laboratory' is the museum's wet collection; field research specimens pickled in alcohol and formaldehyde. (Fig 4) It is another instance of the positivist tradition, with each specimen anchored by a label detailing time, date and precise location (including latitude and longitude) of collection. Still subject to active research, the collection has deep genealogical roots; many specimens were collected in the nineteenth century, some by Alexander von Humboldt himself. This is long-form knowledge, subject to successive iterations but ultimately resolvable. Look longer, know better.



Figure 4 Wet Collection, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, July 2015 (Photograph: the author)

The wet collection is stored in a three-story high, self-supported steel shelving structure, in climate-controlled conditions. Only the lowest level is visible to the visitor, and only from outside of the glazed room containing the storage system. This is a museum display that borrows heavily from the effects of installation art. It is a closed, theatrically-lit, mood-orchestrating space. Like many installations it concretises aspects of the dream state. It is dark, still and silent, yet visually intense. Its space is somewhat indeterminate. It is alternately expansive and crowded. Objects appear simultaneously at close quarters and out of reach. They shift their status; alternating between the banal and the totemic, the beautiful and the grotesque, the sombre and the humorous. Above all, this display traffics in libidinal flows; desire, fascination, the ominous and the ecstatic.

Bataille and nonknowledge

This installation is a morbid space in which death—jar after jar of it—becomes ecstatic and seductive. (Fig 5) It reminded me of Bataille's reflections on death, the death of thought and of ecstasy. These reflections charted a path towards a new unknown; more specifically towards nonknowledge, a place from which new orders of knowledge might emerge in 'laughter or tears, or the poetic, or anguish, or ecstasy' (Bataille 2001, p. 137).



Figure 5 Specimen section, snakes devouring prey, Wet Collection, Museum für Naturkunde, Berlin, July 2015 (Photograph: the author)

In a series of lectures given between 1951–53, Bataille proposed a version of the unknown, or rather, considered the state of knowing nothing, of nonknowledge (Bataille 2001, pp. 111–150, 196–205). Nonknowledge is both an evacuation (knowing nothing) and the threshold of new orders of knowledge. It contests a particular historical trajectory, the Enlightenment will to know, and anticipates knowledge not rooted in science or the self-constituting, self-knowing subject. Nonknowledge manifests, and offers, distinctive experiences. Nonknowledge emerges in experience or thought 'that makes the mind uneasy, induces an imbalance' (Bataille 2001, p. 112). I was reminded of Collen Ahearn's series of paintings of ecstatic Mod dancers. (Fig 6) Their behaviour might be positioned within

a disciplinary framework—cultural studies, subcultural theory, histories of dance, theories of performative identity—yet the dancers, ‘in the zone’, remain ecstatic and unknowable.



Figure 6 Colleen Ahearn, *Feelin' inside*, 2010, oil on paper, 76 x 56 cm. Courtesy the artist and Neon Parc, Melbourne

But nonknowledge is a process as much as an encounter. Bataille says, ‘To specify what I mean by nonknowledge: that which results from every proposition when we are looking to go the fundamental depths of its content, and which makes us uneasy’. Nonknowledge is resistant to Enlightenment epistemology. Bataille contrasts an expansive, ecstatic knowledge with a confident knowledge enmeshed in the servility of completion; ‘I think that knowledge enslaves us, that at the base of all knowledge there is servility, the acceptance of a way of life wherein each moment has meaning only in relation to another or others that will follow it’ (Bataille 2001, p. 129). Offering new orders of knowledge-in-experience, nonknowledge is suggestive of artists’ aspirations to knowledge positioned beyond the horizon of expectation. ‘Every time we give up the will to know,’ Bataille declared, ‘we have the possibility of touching the world with a much greater intensity’ (Bataille 2001, p. 115).

While Bataille was a little too ready to characterise science as a strictly means-and-ends pursuit, nonknowledge seems to me to speak to both the mood of the wet collection and a contemporary conception of knowledge engendered in creative practice. To assume that one knows all that one can know, or all that one needs to know, is to abandon curiosity, according to Bataille (Bataille 2000, p. 112). And curiosity is foundational to research through art. More than that, fetishized, even eroticised, inquiry is foundational to research through the arts.

What *ought* to be abandoned, in Bataille's eyes (what artists abandon, to my mind) is 'our servitude to the anticipated result' (Bataille 2001, p. 123). Nonknowing doesn't obviate thought and inquiry, but these must be directed towards a seeming incommensurable goal; 'Founded on the abandonment of knowledge, from that moment on, an ordered reflection on the experience of non-knowledge becomes possible' (Bataille 2001, p. 123). 'One must continue thinking in order to discover the world of someone who knows that he knows nothing' (Bataille 2001, p. 114).

But lest all of this be mistaken for a poetics of para-discursive dislocation, Bataille issues a timely reminder, applicable to any researcher in any discipline; to ask what nonknowledge is is another way of posing *the* overarching question—'why is there that which I know?' (Bataille 2001, p. 113).

Nonknowledge in artistic practice

Identifying manifestations of nonknowledge in art allows us to leave behind the pseudo-paradox of the Rumsfeldian formulation, the remedial and compensatory alliances formed between art and science, and the notion of artistic knowledge as a para-discursive magic carpet ride. Bataille makes it clear that nonknowledge is *not* not knowing. It is an effect surpassing a territorialised knowledge in which knowing and not-knowing are merely positions in relation to a boundary (and in which the unknown is always recoverable into the known). It is 'the point when knowledge yields' (Bataille 2001, p. 131).

Nonknowledge is not a supplement to classically conceived—say, scientific—knowledge. It is an absence of such knowledge; it is 'the undefinable, what thought cannot conceive' (Bataille 2001, p. 131). Bataille posits nonknowledge as a practice sustaining 'sovereign moments ... as moments having their end in themselves and not as middle terms' (Bataille 2001, p. 125). Such moments emerge in 'the experience of the instant' (Bataille 2001, p. 123). But they are not mystical or alchemical in their manifestation. And this is where Bataille's reflection seem to me to parallel most strongly forms of contemporary practice-led research. Bataille argues that a study of sovereign moments can be undertaken; 'in the sense that the word *study* means an application toward a possibility. Such a study is characterized by the

fact by the fact that we could not enter into it without a practice' (Bataille 2001, p. 125).

So, bluntly, given practice-led research exists within a context in which research outputs, from *techne* to nonknowledge, are logged, what would this look like? Gerhard Richter's abstract paintings (why not start at the top?) could be considered as applications towards the possibility of nonknowledge in art. (Fig 7)



Figure 7 Gerhard Richter, *Abstract painting (725-3)*, 1990, oil on canvas, 225.8 × 200.6 cm, National Gallery of Victoria

Richter commences with the abandonment of stable forms of knowledge and anticipated results. Practice is initiated by a succession of negations and erasures; 'I have nothing to help me, no idea that I can serve in return for being told what to do, no regulation that tells me how, no belief to show me the way, no image of the future,

no construction that I can place on things in order to be given an overriding meaning” (Richter 2009, p. 132). Practice is propelled by the admonition, ‘Accept that I can plan nothing’ (Richter 2009, p. 247).

Practice arrives at a point where it could be understood—not ‘understood’ in a politely prose sense but ‘understood’ as in ‘meaningfully apprehended as’—a text arising from the study of the sovereign, as an experience of nonknowledge. As Richter would have it, ‘A picture presents itself as the Umanageable, the Illogical, the Meaningless’ (Richter 2009, p. 32); as ‘the making of an analogy for something non-visual and incomprehensible’ (Richter 2009, p. 120); as a concretisation of ‘what is beyond my understanding’ (Richter 2009, p. 141). Here, Richter seems to speak as Bataille did, decades earlier, when introducing his project: ‘Today, like the other times, I am going to attempt to communicate my experience of nonknowledge to you. Of course, like the other times, I will fail. But first I would to show you the extent of my failure’ (Bataille 2001, p. 129)

Richter’s abstract paintings are an embodiment, in sustained painting practice, of Bataille’s conception of the death of thought. They are not a parodic postmodern endgame, a trashing of an ideal modernist form with the arbitrariness of postmodernism. They articulate a kind of negative sublime; the presentation of nonknowledge in unknowing itself. As Bataille put it, ‘the thought that founders accomplishes its shipwreck, if one may say so, within thought, in other words, in a thought where the consciousness of foundering persists’ (Bataille 2001, p. 125). Or, as Richter declares, more prosaically, ‘I know nothing, I can do nothing, I understand nothing, I know nothing. Nothing’ (Richter 2009, p. 143).

Conclusion

As the status of creative practices is determined in the research-output economy of the contemporary university, knowledge is variously defined as instrumental (know-how, practical and manual knowledge), as reflective (cultural, historical, perspectivist knowledge), as tacit or implicit, or as para-discursive (Laermans 2012, p. 146) As we move into the latter territory, knowledge assumes a utopian tone, bearing a strong family resemblance to Ernst Bloch’s philosophy of hope: knowledge as a kind of immanent ideality, not yet materialised—beyond the horizon of expectation, yes, but beyond an horizon to which we can point. As we approach this horizon, research, for artists at least, appears increasingly non-instrumental, heterogeneous, extra-discursive. Seeking to place artists’ research both within and beyond territories familiar to the university, proponents of creative research declare hybrid zones, such as the ‘laboratory without protocol’ (Slager 2012, p. 22).

Too often, I feel, the outputs of this research are framed as a counter-discourse, as that which finds the flaw in science’s glass, as the other to the canonical voice, as the

documentation of the corners of experience occluded by the blind spots of the Enlightenment gaze. The twins of such tropes are found in formations of equivalence; artistic practices evoking parallels with the knowledge practices of field work, archive, laboratory, longitudinal study and data mining.

Bataille's model of nonknowledge leaps ahead of these strategies towards something emphatically beyond conventionally conceived knowledge without denying it status as a study, practice or experience. Borgdorff suggests that 'the crux of the matter is whether a phenomenon like research in the arts exists—an endeavour in which the production of art is itself a fundamental part of the research process, and whereby art is partly the result of research' (Borgdorff 2012, p. 31). Bataille's nonknowledge proposes a formal, historical location for such an order of knowledge. Nonknowledge is a practice; admittedly one redolent of crisis. Bataille formulates it as both critical suspension and discovery, in a way that circumvents the assumption that the nothingness of nonknowledge demands the abandonment of art; 'someone who laughs, in principle, doesn't abandon his science, but he refuses to accept it for a while, a limited time, he lets himself pass beyond it through the movement of laughter, so that what he knows is destroyed, but in his depths he preserves the conviction that, just the same, it isn't destroyed.' (Bataille 2001, p. 144)

'There is, in us and in the world', wrote Bataille, 'something that reveals that knowledge was not given to us, and that situates itself uniquely as being unable to be attained by knowledge' (Bataille 2001, p 135). That something in us and the world can be embodied and pursued distinctively in art, as Richter's paintings show. For Richter, the ungiven and unattainable—the unknowable unknown—are effects experienced through a sustained creative practice. If legitimation of creative research is what is at stake, the fact that an artist of Richter's stature has founded his practice in nonknowledge is cause for optimism.

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