

## **Artist as Bricoleuse**

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Annette Nykiel PhD is a socially engaged bricoleuse, maker, and practice-led researcher, wondering about questions of the Country. She is interested in raising awareness of the value and importance of relating to the materiality of non-urban spaces. Annette wanders urban and regional/remote areas in a variety of roles as a geoscientist, arts worker, maker and workshop facilitator. For many years she has exhibited and offered curatorial support in many different spaces in WA, regional Australia and internationally. Her work is held in the John Curtin Gallery, Artspace Mackay and private collections in Australia and overseas.

## **Abstract**

A bricoleuse is a pragmatic woman who practices bricolage. Bricolage involves adapting what is at hand in imaginative and intuitive ways to solve problems. Bricolage may be both a theoretical approach and praxis, particularly suited to creative research. The bricoleuse swerves, strays, wanders and tinkers to create complex new forms of knowing through stories and artefacts in local contexts. These are created from fragments of different viewpoints, voices, and materials by an experienced bricoleuse attempting to make meaning from entangled relationships with the messy, complex world around them.

This paper reflects on the exhibition *meeting place* (2018) as a discourse of bricolage. *meeting place* (2018) was a solo exhibition of fibre and ceramics from a process-oriented practice intending to create relationships between geographical and human elements of a non-urban place. The critical potential of bricolage, in this context, is to piece together the meaning of fragments of sensate awareness, relationships and memory to relate stories. Critically situating bricoles (bits and pieces) together may articulate and enrich the discourse in the indeterminate and dynamic process of experiencing and creating place. A bricoleuse's approach to field-based/practice-led research contributes a relational, conceptual, and methodological approach to creative arts, and to interdisciplinary research frameworks.

## **Keywords**

Bricolage, relationality, diffraction, embodied research, visual art.

## Introduction

This bricoleuse (from the gendered French noun) is a pragmatic woman who practices bricolage. Bricolage involves adapting what is at hand—making do—in imaginative and intuitive ways to solve problems, some of which may arise while investigating the original question. Bricolage may be both a conceptual approach and praxis and is particularly suited to embodied creative research.

This paper will reflect on the exhibition *meeting place* (2018) as a discourse of bricolage. *meeting place* (2018) (Figure 1) was a solo exhibition of fibre, ceramic and found things—invoking Jane Bennett’s thing-power (2004, 2010). The exhibition, to consolidate my PhD research, emerged from a residency in the Spectrum Project Space (Edith Cowan University, Perth). Praxis (doing) and poiesis (becoming) intra-acted (Barad 2007) and diffracted (Barad 2014) in an iterative process of entanglement to acknowledge relationships between the environmental elements of a non-urban place. By environment, I mean an entanglement of the social, physical (including material and abiotic) and biotic ecologies where all things have intrinsic value and agency—akin to Bennett’s (2010) vital materialism and Tim Ingold’s (2011) weather-world. The vital materiality of the environment is not separate from my body. It is relational. It is transitional, embodied and immanently enfolding in a meshwork (Ingold, 2011) of tangled pathways of becoming.



Figure 1: Installation shot of the exhibition *meeting place* (2018) Spectrum Project Space including cloth, fibre string and vessels made from foraged materials found on campus and in the bush. All images and artwork by the author unless otherwise credited.

The critical potential of bricolage, in this context, is to piece together reiterative meanings from fragments of embodied sensate observation/awareness, slow making, physical detritus and memory to create a mythical discourse. Critically situating bricoles (discarded bits and pieces) together may articulate and enrich the discourse in the indeterminate and dynamic process of creating place. A bricoleuse's approach to field-based/practice-led research contributes a relational, conceptual, and embodied approach to art, and through my scientific background and related way of seeing, to a more interdisciplinary research framework.



Figure 2: a ball of finger plied string that fits comfortably into the hand entangles scrap cloth, the detritus of the maker and the place with tacit skill. Scraps of quilt batting, stray threads, biotic material, dust, sweat, tea stains, fly.

### **Bricolage**

A ball of string (Figure 2) is a bricolage— a coming together of left over bits and pieces using a known skill to make some thing that has the potential to be useful and meaningful. It is slowly made and embodies tacit and haptic knowledge, time, story; marked with the essences and detritus of the maker and the place of its making.

Bricolage may be a conceptual approach, praxis or an outcome, and is particularly suited to artistic research but also used in social action research, teaching, nursing and business. At

its most simple, bricolage is 'a technical metaphor for a cognitive and creative process: the composition and generation of mythical discourse' (Johnson, 2012, p. 358) using 'any available means or whatever is at hand' (Markham 2017, p.1) originating out of the structuralist notions of Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966). Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (2000, 2001) further developed the concept that was recontextualised by pedagogues, social action theorists and post-constructionists led by Joe Kincheloe (2001, 2005, 2008). Annette Markham, writing from remix studies, suggests that bricolage is 'characterized as *an action* one takes (as a bricoleur), *an attitude* (or epistemology), and the resulting *product* (or outcome) of both [original emphasis]' (2017, p.1) (Figure 1).

I conceptualise the term bricoleuse, through the biotic assemblage of this feminine body, to give agency to the process of bricolage (adapting Johnson's (2012) explanation of the masculine bricoleur from the original French). The bricoleuse swerves, strays, wanders and tinkers to create complex new forms of knowing from bits and pieces in local contexts and amidst the liminal spaces of existing conceptual frameworks (Hatton, 1989). 'Doing theory' by swerving, straying and wandering are 'experiments in in/determinancy' according to Karen Barad (2012, p.208).

Stories and artefacts from these in/determinate wonderings, are created from fragments of different viewpoints, voices, and foraged materials by an experienced bricoleuse who attempts to reiterate meaning from an entangled relationship with the messy, complex world around them. This emotional, embodied engagement leads to relationships and the potential for relations of care in a fluid, dynamic environment. Here, the emergence of meaning and understanding is situated, contextual and may come after knowing and this troubles western epistemology (Ashcroft, 2014).

Bricolage is relationally entangled in the affordances of not-knowing (in/determinancy) which include tacit knowledge, the process of foraging bits and pieces while wandering in non-urban spaces and making that invoke understandings of place. The affordance of this embodied knowledge is an in/determinate, not-knowing space where the experience of handling materials and intra-acting with the environment may lead into a diffracted process of making, an emergence that proceeds meaning and understanding. I suggest this is close to an onto-epistemology (knowing in being) described by Barad (2007). As embodied engagements tend to be relational and therefore ethical (Barad 2007), they become ethico-onto-epistemological as things, environment and bricoleuse are entangled, considered and positioned within the process.

Denzin and Lincoln describe bricolage as 'a complex, dense, reflexive collage-like creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings and interpretations of the

world or phenomenon under analysis' (as cited in Hammersley, 2008, p. 4) at that point of time from the view of the embodied researcher in that place. This filters into the daily life of a situated knowledge maker to become an ethical, interdisciplinary journey of learning where the mature, accomplished bricoleuse privileges time, relationships and process over outcome, and questions over answers. However, the bricoleuse and the bricolage always remain open to the potentiality of not-knowing as the relationships change and new questions/problems form. These are meaningful intra-actions rather than causal relationships at all levels of environment where 'the properties of materials, regarded as constituents of an environment, cannot be identified as fixed, essential attributes of things, but are rather processual and relational. They are neither objectively determined nor subjectively imagined but practically experienced' (Ingold, 2011, p.30). It is the possibilities of these ethical relationships that may be connected in putting together fragments of diverse thinking to form a thick bricolage of theory/thought experiments and may slowly emerge as forms (Figure 1, 2) in the maker's hands.

### **Bricoles**

I glean materials in the field that I recognise and those that pique my interest. These may have the potential to be useful, perhaps because I understand their material language—a rusty bottle top, fallen eucalypt leaves and lake brine for the dyepot; *Hardenbergia spp.* vine, blown down in a storm, to weave a basket (Figure 1, right). Markham (2017) comments that for the bricoleur, materials 'are not known as a result of their usefulness; they are deemed to be useful or interesting because they are first of all known' (p. 4). Bricoles are used as tools/materials in the bricolage process but may also form a bricolage. For example, a found jar may be used as a dyepot (Figure 3) or wrapped in a cloth bundle to secure it for the next dyepot or for storing the bottle tops and leftover dyestuff—bricoles for another project.

Useful but seemingly disparate bricoles—sundry and ill-assorted jars, rags, windfall leaves, bottle tops and rainwater are reimagined as solar dye kits (Figure 3), solving a problem as I did not have a dyepot with me. Making do with foraged cloth, metal and plant, I tinker with a known process of dyeing while entangled with the weather-world, this potentially results in coloured and marked cloth (Figure 6, 14) that narrate the story of this bricolage (process and outcome).



Figure 3: Making do with found objects. Solar dyeing—recycled glass jars, windfall plant material, rainwater, recycled sample bags.

### **Reflecting on the exhibition *meeting place* (2018) as a discourse of bricolage**

*meeting place* (2018) (Figure 1) emerged from field-based PhD research that culminated in a three week residency and an exhibition of textiles, fibres, ceramics and found things from a process-oriented practice—wandering/wondering—intending to reiterate relationships amongst the physical and human environment of a non-urban place. I added foraged fibre from the campus grounds to bricoles gathered/made in the field, these emerged as artworks in the exhibition. Constrained by only using the gathered things I thought useful, I made do and tinkered in an iterative process from which the site-specific bricolages of the exhibition emerged.

As a bricoleuse who makes, I wander, curious in the bush. Noticing the details between my feet, foraging for useful bricoles, I wonder how they relate to what I am thinking about, the theory I read and the sensate awareness of my body here now. I recall the names of the plants and their habits; the narratives of the geomorphology and the weather and how they are entangled in the deep time of this place.



Figure 4: Prenumbered mineralogical sample bags filled with geological samples at a drill site beginning to show the effects of being exposed to sun and wind.

For example, finding a discarded mineralogical sample bag, perhaps one of the cloth ones from the drill hole in Figure 4, leads me to ponder:

How does installing sample bags critique the mining industry of which I am a former employee?

The symbolic reconfiguring of these repurposed sample bags as in *Strata* (2018) (Figure 5), the artist book *Samples of Place Too* (2016-18) (Figure 6) and installation *The Pit* (2018) (Figure 7) operate as a critique for mining and cycles of disturbance, erosion and deposition by relating stories embodied in the colours and the marks made on the bags. The stains of red brown, for example, may also allude to blood, shed by the land and the people—the original inhabitants and the miners and the FIFO workers—damaged by the extraction of the mineral wealth. The bags embedded with their stories bring to my mind, the where and the how of their making and our embedded herstories—stories related by this feminine body—as well as containing physical traces of the earth, plants and detritus from these places that I tinkered with to mark them.



Figure 5: *Strata* (2018), hand dyed cloth, found fence paling, limestone, basalt, 100 x 80cm, Spectrum Project Space.



Figure 6: *Samples of Place Too* (2016-18) (detail), artist book, reclaimed prenumbered sample bags, solar dyed with soil samples and windfall plant material.

These stories re-call the writings of Lucy Lippard (1997, 2014) on place, mining, land use and kinaesthetic experience for an artist in/of the landscape and Nien Schwarz's installation *Requiem for Rain* (2006). During my residency and in the exhibition *meeting place*, I diffracted these ideas, stories and memories through my observations while making. This led, after several iterations, to the large-scale bricolage of 240 dyed and stitched sample bags, *The Pit* (2018) (Figure 7) with its grid map configuration. Grid maps are artefacts from the toolkit of this geologist, now reconfigured by this bricoleuse who tinkers with these technical skills (Johnson 2012) to create a mythopoetic pitwall.



Figure 7: *The Pit* (2018), gridded, hand dyed, stitched, repurposed mineralogical sample bags, 350 x 820cm, Spectrum Project Space.



Figure 8: *The Country* (2018) (install shot) dawn chorus audio, wood fired ceramics—vessels and beads, finger plied cloth or plant fibre string, hand woven/coiled baskets, retted fibre, found objects, 1500 x 350cm, Spectrum Project Space.

*The Country* (Figure 8, Figure 9) emerged during the residency, when bits and pieces at hand were put together in an iterative process as I strayed and swerved amongst them. It was intended as a visceral topography of thing, artefact, and subtle pathways amidst materiality in juxtaposition with carefully positioned gatherings of string, baskets, beads, ceramic shards, fibre and ceramic vessels. This bricolage covered the floor and was mirrored (reminiscent of a Rorschach blot) on the wall dissipating into scattered constellations blurring land into sky, and floor into wall. This was intended as an invocation to the Country—earth, sky, biota, and environment; an expansive map to invoke a non-urban sense of place and the rich embodied histories of Aboriginal and settler people and their visceral connections to land and place. There were allusions to pathways; tracks and traces through stone and sand, tidelines left by waves, erosion, deposition and the slow passage of time. A disparate gathering of things with their own rich his/herstories that allowed the emergence of a mythical discourse in a local context.



Figure 9: *The Country* (2018) (detail), peopled by viewers, dawn chorus audio, ceramics, beads, string, fibre, baskets, found objects, 1500 x 350cm, Spectrum Project Space. Photographer Alyssa Nykiel.

Peopled by the viewer (Figure 9) wandering through—an embodied connection between the viewer and the place emerged. There were traces left by other people passing, a stray hair, a coloured thread, a drop of red wine; a reminder that people and the environment are entangled regardless of where they are and that things have voice. These bricoles of detritus add to the *The Country* and its story through the action of the viewer giving agency to the detritus and adding to the artefacts and the story. For example, I later found a piece of blue thread possibly from the dress on the right of Figure 9, it reminded me of my dear friend and spending time together mothering, gathering and making baskets—the thread relates to a fragment of story and adds to the artwork..

How do I take the ball of string from the dashboard of the car (Figure 10) where it journeyed from the remote field site of its making, and install it with the expectation of it performing as an art object (Figure 13)?



Figure 10: Ball of finger plied string on the dashboard, heading west along the Great Central Road, 2015. Like the ball in Figure 2, it will become travel stained and accumulate detritus and stories of the road before reappearing in the gallery.



Figure 11: *Panspermia I* (2015-17), ball of finger plied string, recycled cotton singlets worn close to my skin while wandering, 45 x 45cm, Spectrum Project Space. Photographer Anna Palma.

*Panspermia I* (Figure 11) head-sized, suspended at eye height adjacent to the gallery entrance and the north wall was visible to the passer by. Installed as a clear visual signal, the intention was to entice passing foot traffic to wonder and wander through the exhibition that resulted from the bricolage process. *Panspermia II* and *III* (Figure 12, Figure 13) were positioned with the purpose of adding layers of detail to the mythopoetic story told by the exhibition; links may only be made when turning to leave the gallery and noticing *Panspermia III* (Figure 13) behind the pillar (centre back Figure 1). The middle ball of *Panspermia III* (Figure 13) journeyed on the dash (Figure 10)—a seemingly disparate detail that adds richness, amidst this mythical discourse and embodies the process in artefact.



Figure 12: *Strata* (2018), hand dyed cotton cloth, found fence paling, limestone, basalt, 100 x 80cm. *Panspermia II* (2015-17), travail stained, finger plied string ball of recycled cloth, 25 x 25cm, Spectrum Project Space. Photographer Claire Busby



Figure 13: *Panspermia III* (2015-17), finger plied string balls of well-travelled, recycled cloth, 45 x 45cm, Spectrum Project Space. Photographer Anna Palma.

Unsolicited audience feedback suggested welcome elements of surprise were elicited when time was taken to notice the smaller details. Some found these humorous, like stumbling across something unexpected when wandering in the bush and wondering about its story, part of the bricolage process.

Can the bundles of the dyeing process perform as an art object?



Figure 14: *The camp* (2015-17), bundled sample bags, found metal, leaves, string, 25 x 250cm, Spectrum Project Space. Photographer Louise Gan

*The camp* (2018) (Figure 14), is an installation of windfall plants and disparate found objects bundled together in cloth. These were artefacts of the agency of the bricolage process that spoke of the possibilities, indeterminacies and potential energy of the tensions of herstory and experience in the Country. The things (bricoles) of the process become an installation (bricolage) but retain the potential to return to the dyepot or be unbundled to reveal their treasures, becoming individual artworks or part of a gridded pit wall like Figure 7. The bricoleuse's acknowledgment of the potential for a thing to speak in multiple voices in negotiated relationships as an artwork continues after *meeting place* (2018).

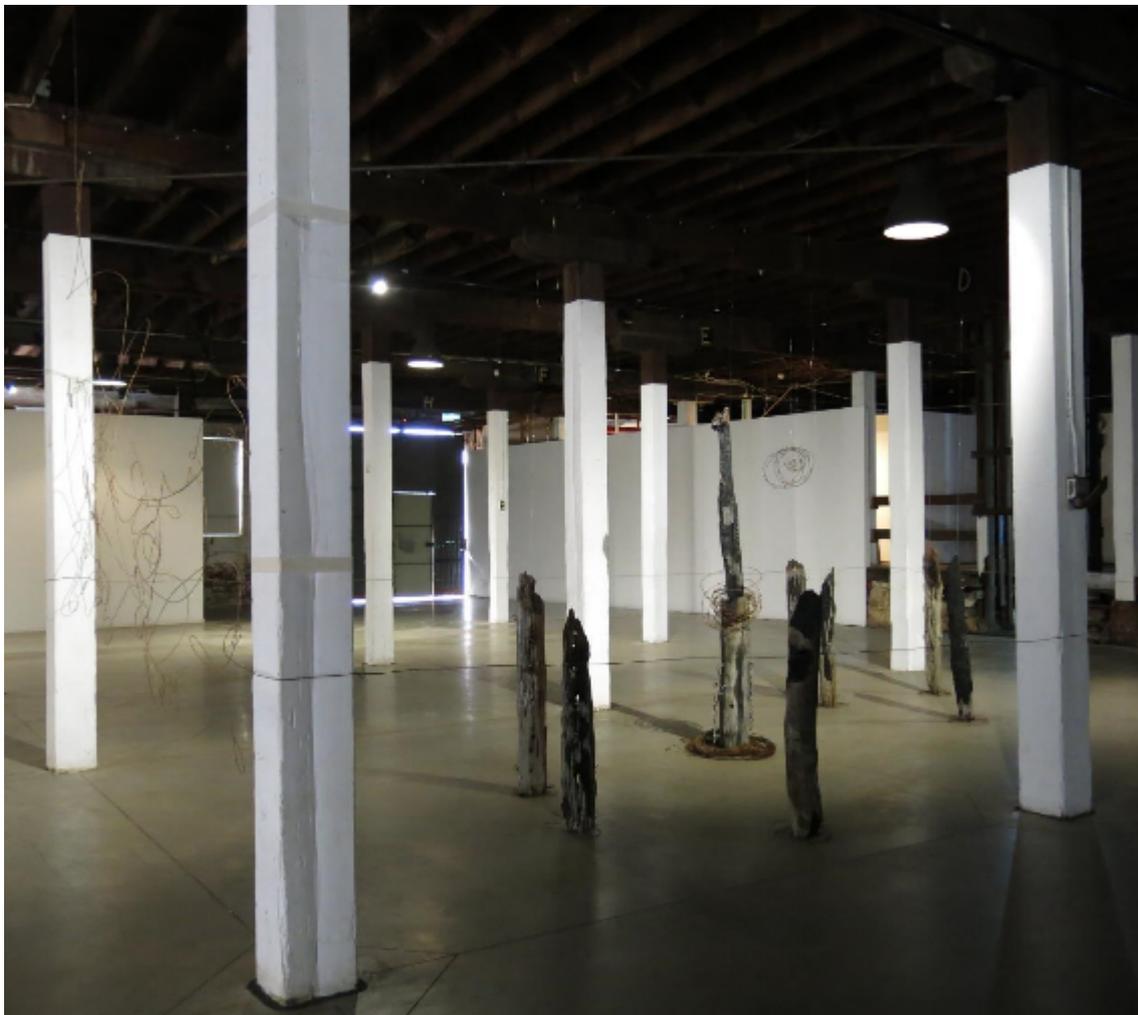


Figure 15: *For Sale, firewood, only used once* (detail) (2018), approx. 9m x 4.5m, reclaimed fencing materials, fishing line, PSAS, Fremantle.

*For Sale, firewood, only used once* (2018) (Figure 15), an installation in a recent group show *Destabilising Walls*, emerged from asking what can the materials of a burnt fence say about destabilising walls? The posts and wire were rendered useless by devastating bushfires that impacted our local area in the 2016 Summer. The fence is no barrier to a wall of fire but traps those who are trying to flee. Fire destabilises walls both physical/material and those of place, identity, and self. Yet both fire and fence are ubiquitous tools of control/containment but also agents of change fundamental to the environment of the non-urban. This artwork was an outcome of 'making do' with a carload of 'useless' fencing materials and a roll of discarded fishing line in a port side warehouse historically used for storing wool.

### **Becoming Concluded**

Swerving and rebounding, handling things, reconfiguring and wondering about the possibilities may lead to a diffraction of thoughts through the materials and the emergence of narratives that relate to this doing by telling stories through the emerging materiality. This is the case in the large-scale installations *The Country*, *The Pit* and *For Sale, firewood*. The thing-power of the artefacts—sample bags and textiles, ceramics and found things—combine to tell stories and evoke the potential for insight into the places from which they have emerged. These bricolages and the process of their gathering invite a diffraction of multiple views of the same phenomena influenced by materials, time, place, and viewer.

Wandering along pathways with knots and loops of not-knowing leads to wonder about previously unimaginable possibilities and tasks that need creative solutions. I use tools (literal and conceptual) that have not yet been invented but can be created and imagined from the bits and pieces in my toolbox and those I glean, observe, repurpose. The process of bricolage transformed the entangled, relational experience of a bricoleuse into a socio-cultural experience for an urban audience. This also considered the implications of bricolage as a research approach where the studio is a situated, mythopoetic place from which a discourse becomes possible in multiple materials and their voices (Figure 1, 10).

This paper reflected on the exhibition *meeting place* (2018) as a discourse of bricolage. Wandering and wondering extends from this body of work to other possibilities and relational entanglements with the ground beneath my feet and the environment—social, material, physical that I intra-act with. In this context, the critical potential of bricolage pieces together reiterative meanings from fragments of embodied sensate observation, slow making, physical detritus and memory to relate stories. A bricoleuse's approach to field-based/practice-led research contributes a relational, conceptual and embodied approach to creative arts, and by entangling with my scientific background begins to reimagine interdisciplinary research frameworks.

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