

Coordenação  
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# INVESTIGAÇÃO EM ARTES

A necessidade  
das ideias artísticas

*Research in the Arts*  
The need for artistic ideas

**INVESTIGAÇÃO EM ARTES**  
**A necessidade das ideias artísticas**

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## INTRODUÇÃO

“The economy and ecology of images and thought-encrusted objects are only burgeoning, nurtured by technologies that are in fact eruptive, pervasive, and increasingly accessible. And what does this abundance of art objects and activities do for and to culture portend? Of course, on one elemental level, it means the proliferation and distribution of *ideas*, and the only matter of final consequence is the quality of the ideas (certainly as much as the quality of the objects, as contested as that may be in some quarters).”

STEVEN HENRY MADOFF, *Art School. (Propositions for the 21 st Century)*

“If we had waited for philosophers to agree upon a solid ontological and epistemological basis for artistic research, we might not, even now, have begun.”

ANNETTE ÄRLANDER, *Artistic Research in a Nordic Context*

Este livro pretende explorar a questão da caracterização das ideias artísticas no âmbito da investigação em artes, sendo que, ao tornar manifesto mais um conjunto de hipóteses para a perscrutação da peculiaridade destas ideias, também se aspira a uma defesa mais subtil e actual das mesmas enquanto noções reguladoras daquilo que se desenvolve no campo da produção artística. Porém, tratando-se de investigação artística conducente a uma discussão pública (seja enquanto tarefa de partilha e interpelação crítica de especialistas em artes, seja enquanto actividade práctico-teórica para fins de obtenção de grau académico), a singularidade desta experiência e a originalidade desta investigação serão necessariamente acompanhadas de uma

## INTRODUCTION

“The economy and ecology of images and thought-encrusted objects are only burgeoning, nurtured by technologies that are in fact eruptive, pervasive, and increasingly accessible. And what does this abundance of art objects and activities do for and to culture and portend? Of course, on one elemental level, it means the proliferation and distribution of *ideas*, and the only matter of final consequence is the quality of the ideas (certainly as much as the quality of the objects, as contested as that may be in some quarters).”

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Annette Arlander, *Artistic Research in a Nordic Context*

This book explores the question of artistic ideas in the field of research in the arts. By proposing a new set of perspectives about the peculiarity of these sorts of ideas, what is also sought is a more subtle and current defense of them as motivating notions for what is developed in the field of artistic production. However, in the case of artistic research which is expected to be submitted to public discussion (whether as an issue to share and discuss with art’s specialists, or as a practical-theoretical activity to obtain an academic degree), the singularity of this experience and the originality of this investigation will necessarily be accompanied by a formalization that guarantees intelligibility to artistic manifestations and the artistic ideas that emerge from them.

The essays presented here refer to the autonomy and ambivalence of artistic ideas, daring to compare – sometimes explicitly, others deferred – the nature of these notions with those that originate in aesthetics, especially in the aesthetic ideas that have their roots in philosophy (in contrast to aesthetics that are rooted in the very experience of art). The essays allow the emergence of more tense, more insightful modes of understanding the complex network of expressive layers in an art work that unfolds through the sensual experience, interaction and incorporation of the interpreter.

By saying so, this book also investigates and discusses the usurpation of artistic research by excessively hermeneutic aesthetics and an art history diligently iconological, demonstrating how artistic experience already possesses *in itself* - and **projects out of itself** - properties related to the formation of ideas which are indispensable to a practical-theoretical research. In a text alluding to *ekphrasis*, Jean-Luc Nancy, while not referring to artistic research as a theme, gives us a generous and pertinent contribution to its understanding as a sensitive and ambivalent manifestation, before we become “examiners”, “thinkers”, that is, inquirers who instrumentalize the nature and mediation that an art work and its research can provide us:

“Entendons par *ekphrasis* la parole issue de l’image: non pas celle que nous pouvons prononcer à propos d’elle mais celle qu’elle nous propose ou suggère elle-même. L’*ekphrasis* à ce compte n’est pas un commentaire, ni une analyse, ni une évaluation de l’œuvre. Encore moins consiste-t-elle à traiter de l’œuvre dans un contexte défini par ailleurs, qu’il s’agisse d’un roman, d’une réflexion esthétique ou même d’une revue d’exposition. Elle se tient au plus près de l’œuvre et tente de recueillir les mots qui se forment à la surface de celle-ci, entre celle-ci et nous, ses spectateurs, avant que nous redevenions discoureurs, examinateurs, penseurs.”<sup>1</sup>

Artistic research (which positions the art works at the core of the produced reflection and argumentation, even as it oscillates between *disputatio* and contemplation) has a purpose. After our immersion and sensitive inquiry about the force contained in the works of art, what awaits us as intersubjective mediation will always consist in the need to present and discuss the artistic ideas that flow within the surfaces or spaces in which they were materialized, trying to symbolize an unusual experience and articulate new ways of being for a given community of participants and researchers involved in art situations.

These were the motivations that guided us to produce this volume on research in the arts, giving continuity to a project started in 2010, confronting and complementing our perspectives on the subject with others that emerge from different research cultures, such as Annette Arlander (Sweden), Jen Webb (Australia), Henrik Frisk (Sweden), and Alexandra Bonham (New Zealand).

José Quaresma

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, “Ekphrasis”. *Études françaises*, vol. 51, N°2, 2015, pp. 25-35.

# “Not ideas about the thing, but the thing itself”: poetry, materiality and ideas

JEN WEBB, UNIVERSITY OF CANBERRA

## Introduction

We start with ideas. Or rather, we start with the language in which we can articulate ideas. Or again: we start with the impress of the material world on our bodies, with sensory perception, with the flickering of thought and feeling across our minds.

This is research: meeting the idea that will mobilise us; finding the language to read, produce, examine, analyse, communicate; attending to the body and the world. Whatever mode of research in which someone operates, these elements must be found.

Where models of research differ, significantly, is in what sort of understanding of knowledge they are grounded, what sort of knowledge they are expected to generate. Let me offer a few quick mudmaps: for a physical scientist, there are things to measure and record, mathematical equations to apply, tests and models that others can replicate, a drive to discover what is there, hiding in plain sight. For a social scientist there is (usually) the collection and analysis of observations, impressions, documents, transcripts of interviewees' words, and the effort to establish reliable understandings about social phenomena. For the artist-researcher, it is most often a question of being immersed in one's practice; and reading, and looking, and thinking, and attending to the feeling of being and of the world; and then the problem presents itself.

Writer Brian Castro says, “For me, at least, a novel arrives because it is raining, or because a voice injects humour into the utterance of a deep melancholia” (2018). Writer Neil Gaiman says, “Most of all, ideas come from confluence — they come from two things flowing together. They come, essentially, from daydreaming” (Gaiman 2011).

Painter Pablo Picasso says, “Ideas are simply starting points. I can rarely set them down as they come to my mind... To know what you’re going to draw, you have to begin drawing” (in Brassai 1999: 66).

The starting points reported are frequently of that nature: something shimmers in my peripheral vision; the smell of rain on hot ground triggers a sense-memory; something vague and formless is circulating in the mind; and I begin to write, or draw, or dance, or sing, or whatever my form is; semi-aimlessly at first, not sure where I am going, but open to what might come to meet me.

It isn’t all that different when it comes to research. Since I am an academic, and my contract of employment requires that I undertake research and supervise doctoral candidates, they and I must produce research that fits the criteria of the academy. For candidates and for me, therefore, there is an obligation to understand what research means in the creative arts, and how best to find a worthwhile project—one that both allows the art to be art, and simultaneously is capable of delivering reportable knowledge outcomes. In this chapter I trace out the already-widely canvassed understandings of what research is and how artists might approach it; and then move on to discuss, with particular reference to poetry, the confluence of ideas and materiality in creative research work.

## Doing research

Research has been quite narrowly framed since 1963, when the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development hosted a meeting to develop what they called ‘Standard Practice for Surveys of Research and Experimental Development’. An outcome of this meeting was a document known as the Frascati Manual, which contains a definition of research that, as the Manual avers, has ‘stood the test of time’ (OECD 2015: 44) over half a century. The current (7<sup>th</sup>) edition has been updated to address changes in both social norms and research practice, over that half-century—and here I note particularly the inclusion of research that is neither statistical nor located within the physical sciences.

The current definition reads:

Research and experimental development (R&D) comprise creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge—including knowledge of humankind, culture and society—and to devise new applications of available knowledge. (OECD 2015: 44)

It develops this definition by elaborating on the activities that, it states, constitute research: ‘For an activity to be an R&D activity, it must satisfy five core criteria’ (45), and these criteria are discussed on pages 45-48. Briefly, they list activities that are:

- *novel* (‘aimed at new findings’);
- *creative* (‘based on original, not obvious, concepts and hypotheses’);
- *uncertain* (‘about the final outcome’);
- *systematic* (‘planned and budgeted’);
- *transferable and/or reproducible* (‘lead to results that could be possibly reproducible’).

While this manual is not a handbook for research practice, it tends to be treated as such by governments, universities and other research institutions in their policies and procedures. It offers a reasonable stab at activities associated with research in general, but limits the outcomes of research to knowledge, which implies that research activity results in a tidy package that can be put to work. This is patently not the case, and in fact many policy and scholarly documents identify knowledge *and understanding* as valid outcomes (see, for instance, the Australian Qualifications Framework 2012, or Scrivener 2002).

The Manual is, however, an important starting point, if only because of its wide uptake globally; it presents an idea of research that has had real traction. Moreover this 7<sup>th</sup> edition includes sections on research in design and through artistic creation. It works its way through these two research paradigms, and its analysis demonstrates that it sees both modes as included in research only under a caveat: they don’t really fit. Design, for example, may involve R&D but “not all design meets the functional novel and uncertainty tests” (63) listed in the five criteria, and nor do they involve uncertainty (64). In terms of creative arts research, the Manual seems to have very little understanding of what is involved. It (effectively) draws on a version of Christopher Frayling’s taxonomy of artistic research: research *in, for or through* the arts (Frayling 1993/94). It describes just two approaches: first, research that involves ‘developing goods and services to meet the expressive needs of artists and performers’ (OECD 2015: 64) – that is, research for the arts; and next, ‘studies of the arts (musicology, art history theatre studies ...)’ (65) – that is, research in the arts. Research through the arts – practice-led research – is mentioned and rejected in the same breath, on the grounds that it fails to meet the five-criteria test: while it might be novel, it focuses on artistic expression and not knowledge; and its results cannot be reproducible; hence it is not R&D in the terms prescribed by the Frascati Manual.



Not surprisingly, many artist-researchers disagree strongly, and they are supported in this by millennia of scholarly writing that identifies how art practice generates knowledge, and creative ideation leads to understandings that are of social and intellectual value (see, e.g., Plato 1914; Vico 2000; Dewey 1934; Wordsworth 1802; or Wolff 1981, to name just a few). More specifically, they can base their disagreement on the applicability of the five criteria. Take, for example, the criterion of reproducibility of results. A recent report in *Nature* describes the sciences as facing 'a reproducibility crisis' (Baker 2016: 452) because a survey of scientists shows 'More than 70% of researchers have tried and failed to reproduce another scientist's experiments, and more than half have failed to reproduce their own experiments'. If the scientists aren't confident that reproducibility is a necessary criterion for genuine research, then it seems valid to reject it as necessary for creative arts research.

Similarly the criterion of systematic activity again cannot be sustained across disciplines. Although there must be at least a gesture toward planning and budgeting, much research in all fields begins in, and continues to be inflected by, hunches, guesses and moments of intuitions (see Polanyi & Prosch 1975; Seago 1994-95). This is perhaps more visible in creative arts research than in other modes, because such projects frequently begin not with a defined research question but with what Brad Haseman calls an *enthusiasm of practice*. "Practice-led researchers", he writes, "construct experiential starting points from which practice follows. They tend to 'dive in', to commence practising to see what emerges" (Haseman 2007). Diving in and splashing around – play, effectively – is for many artist-researchers the space in which a research project emerges and begins to clarify. It is the generative spark for *ideas* that, Haseman continues, "arise out of the needs of practitioners as they practise".

Poet Katharine Coles (Hetherington & Coles 2014) says:

Research is a huge part of creating the conditions for poetry, though it's not quite the same as scholarly research or even the kind of research you would do to write a novel. The biggest difference is that I'm looking for something different—not evidence or a sense of historical or situational accuracy but something that will trigger a kind of productive dreaming that has its source in defamiliarisation and wonder—the encounter with something larger or outside the self.

Such encounters can happen only when the researcher is engaged: when they put themselves in the way of a something. Practice-led research projects, therefore, begin in practice – yes, with ideas and questions and problems that demand atten-

tion – but with a commitment to being and attending, and to using the art-trained hand and eye and body to put oneself in the place of encounter. This is research; but as Pierre Bourdieu writes:

practice has a logic which is not that of the logician. This has to be acknowledged in order to avoid asking of it more logic than it can give, thereby condemning oneself either to wring incoherence out of it or to thrust a forced coherence upon it. (1990: 80)

And John Keats, in a letter to his brothers on 21 December 1817, articulates key elements of the creative research package. Keats describes his own thoughts about the poetic process, and writes:

it struck me what quality went to form a Man of Achievement, especially in Literature, and which Shakespeare possessed so enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is, when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason. (Keats 1817)

A man or woman thus capable of not reaching after fact and reason, of letting them come to her or to him, is unlikely to wring incoherence out of practice; and in fact is producing research though according to a logic that is not that of the Frascati Manual. Practice comes first; logic follows. Barbara Bolt observes that "the focus on artworks, rather than practice, has produced a gap in our understanding of the work of art as process" (2010: 5); and that 'It is art as a mode of revealing and as a material productivity, not just the artwork, that constitutes creative arts research' (2007: 34). Attention to practice and process is likely to construct the foundation upon which artist-researchers can account for the thinking and engagement involved in the process, and the understandings attained thereby.

### Poetry as research

Samuel Johnson writes that 'Poetry is the art of uniting pleasure with truth by calling imagination to the help of reason' (2006: 282). Truth, reason, instruction: this is a lexicon drawn from the academy rather than (precisely) from the creative field; and I cite Johnson here because over the past 250 years this sense of what poetry is capable of delivering has not entirely shifted. Yes, Wordsworth, in a rather anodyne gesture, defined poetry as 'Emotion recollected in tranquillity' (Wordsworth & Coleridge 2008: 183), but he also gestures strongly toward the thinking and exam-

ination required in the translation of emotion to language, the knowledge function of poetry, and what the poet learns in the process, and can convey to readers.

This is not self-expression, à la the Frascati Manual, but an obdurate and extended knowledge practice, conducted in poetry. In this chapter I focus on the production of poetry – the work of making – rather than the knowledge that might be contained within or conveyed by a completed poem: aligning my approach with the title of Stephen Scrivener’s 2002 essay, ‘The art object does not embody a form of knowledge’. Scrivener observes, in that essay, that “Few artists, to my knowledge, make claims for their work as having particular meaning and many appear to revel in the fact that a work can engender multiple and even inconsistent interpretations” (Scrivener 2002). It is not in meaning, then, that I locate my discussion, but in making; I therefore avoid discussing the critical literature on poetry, and attend instead to creative practice as research activity.

It is not uncommon to find myself, at poetry readings or parties, challenged on the idea that poetry can be research; and as well as the backhander from the Frascati Manual, there are many scholarly documents identifying poetry as beautiful or moving but not a knowledge practice. Giorgio Agamben, for example, opens his *Stanzas* with the statement that poetry is ‘a word that is unaware, as if fallen from the sky’ while philosophy is ‘a word that has all seriousness and consciousness for itself’ (1993: xvii).<sup>1</sup> Certainly, if I assess poetry against the five Frascati criteria, then I find that like most creative practice, it comes up short. It aims at new expression rather than new knowledge; it is rarely systematic; and it is not reproducible. Viewed from a different perspective though – a less instrumentalist perspective – it fits very closely with the logic of research. I look, here, to the etymology of the word ‘research’, which derives from the Old French term ‘*recherche*’: a compilation of the prefix *re-*, which adds intensity to a word, and *cerchier*, which translates as ‘to search’. Formally then, it means ‘intensive searching’ or ‘intensive looking’ (Hoad 1996).

This is what poets consistently report as their practice: looking, intensively; observing; attending; peeling back the surfaces of what we are considering; peeling back the surfaces of our own thought and feelings and responses. Francis Ponge, for example, writes of his own practice that his resolve is: ‘never sacrifice the object of my study in order to enhance some verbal turn discovered on the subject ... Always go back to the object itself, to its raw quality, its *difference*’ (Ponge 2008 [1941]: 3). He describes himself as looking intensively: ‘writing about the Loire ... I must constantly immerse my eyes and mind in it’ (3). He describes himself too as taking seriously the object of his poetic attention in its objecthood – ‘The object is always more im-

<sup>1</sup> He qualifies this, averring that ‘every authentic poetic project is directed toward knowledge, just as every authentic act of philosophy is always directed toward joy’ (1993: xvii), but the movement from unawareness to knowledge is not well mapped.

portant, more interesting, more capable (full of rights): it has no duty whatsoever toward me, it is I who am obliged to it’ (4). This is a *diving in*, in Haseman’s terms, but a deeper diving than the initial exploration Haseman is depicting. It is going beyond the initial impulse, not necessarily to build knowledge about the object, but to attempt to find a way to translate between objects and people.

Translation is an important element for many poets: Bernard Herman writes about the need to translate from idea to object, and then object to word. So, first the idea presents itself to me, in the form of an experience of a material object: the Loire; a pebble; a bird. Then in and through the intensive looking and investigation that is poetic research, I aim to find a bridge between “the material certainty of the thing as an object” and “the inconstancy and ambiguity of what objects might mean” (Herman 2013: 121). Because though things are of and for themselves, as phenomenology tells us, and as Ponge tells us, they also mean; and mean in highly variable ways, offering meanings that depend on the observer, on the context of the observation, on the lens through which they are viewed.

It takes attention to do this. William Wordsworth insists that:

Poems to which any value can be attached were never produced on any variety of subjects but by a man who, being possessed of more than usual organic sensibility, had also thought long and deeply. (2008: 16)

And while Wordsworth is not, here, checking his privilege (he had the time and money and the support of a household of women, which meant he could in fact think long and deeply), it is nonetheless a value shared by many poets, from many backgrounds. Poet Philip Salom describes his preparation for a new body of work: “It’s a work I have not yet created, maybe not yet earned, a work which will break new ground if I stay focused on the waiting” (Salom and Brophy). Poet Diane Fahey discusses the early stages of a new project, and says, “I don’t know if it’s too much to say that there’s a kind of Zen involved. You’re kind of listening and waiting and you have to go back and do the work and then you hold back and return. It’s allowing time just to do it” (Fahey and Brophy). Time matters, when engaged in the practice of poetry that is committed to finding out new knowledge, new understandings; and so does patience, and a trusting to process and to one’s own training and to the affordances of the field: together, these can provide the confidence to make work that exists in pure uncertainty.

## Materiality and meaning

But perhaps more than mere trusting, confidence can emerge from the processes of communication with, and translation from, the material world. The HASS sector has in recent decades experienced the ‘material turn’, which is evidenced in an increasing interest in phenomenology, and the publication of environmental writings (see, e.g., Harvey et al 2014; Miller 2013). Such work tends to be post-hoc, insofar as it investigates creative and cultural products, but it has been valuable in exposing the tension that lies between object and idea, and deconstructing the notion of a fixed binary relationship between them. This is something poets – artists more generally – know: not least because ideas and objects are the matter through which we often work. And though ideas are commonly considered ephemeral – for example, they are not legally protected as intellectual property until they have been expressed in material form – they nonetheless possess a material quality, which is manifested in the impact they have on the self.

Wallace Stevens’ poem ‘Not Ideas about the Thing but the Thing Itself’, seems (if one reads the title only) to reify the gap between object and idea, but over the process of the poems, something else emerges. Its opening lines read:

*At the earliest ending of winter,  
In March, a scrawny cry from outside  
Seemed like a sound in his mind.*

*He knew that he heard it,  
A bird’s cry, at daylight or before,  
In the early March wind. (2015: 565)*

We find ourselves, at the start, in what Critchley describes as ‘the season of hard reality, of the world contracted into the absence of imagination, where the human subject is powerless before an oppressive, violent and indifferent reality’ (2005: 65). And what Stevens crafts in this poem draws on perception: on what he observed and experienced. ‘Not ideas about the thing’; which is to say, ideas won’t work in this environment; only a sensitive attunement to the world is efficacious. The last lines, on the bird’s cry in winter, reads:

*... It was like  
A new knowledge of reality.*

I draw attention, here, to Stevens’ qualification. That cry, ‘still far away’, is not knowledge as such, but its analogue of knowledge; and therefore would not count as such under the rubric of the Frascati Manual. That ‘new knowledge of reality’ does, however, both invoke and evoke understanding of ‘the thing itself’: it takes the ineffable, the sensory – that which is beyond the linguistic frame (see Smith 2006)<sup>2</sup> – and attempts to conjure from feeling the experiential world, its objects and their meanings.

John Dewey’s notion of ‘felt difficulty’ (1910: 72) is a way of exploring this; and his narrative goes like this: in an everyday situation, a person is likely to encounter something that seems out of place, ‘wrong’, unexpected or uncomfortable – this is the felt difficulty. I rehearse a personal experience of felt difficulty: when I spotted, out of the corner of my eye, a snake lying across my verandah. Australian snakes include the most venomous in the world, and while such snakes live in the bushland near my house, they rarely appear in the garden or on the verandah. Seeing one there, or thinking I had seen it, therefore initiated a felt difficulty, one that literally froze me in place. I did not think of Dewey, but I responded according to his formulation of human action in the face of a felt difficulty: first the experience; then a contextual or environmental scan (*what’s going on? what am I really seeing?*); next, coming up with a possible solution (*it’s a sick snake?*); then a process of clarifying that solution through reasoning (*it’s not moving at all; is it actually a snake?*); and then the application of observation and experiment that allows the individual to confirm, or review, their original observation and solution (*oh, it’s just a stick*). It involves, therefore, feeling, observation, perception, thought, experience/experiment, and solution: the sorts of steps one would be likely to apply in a research project.

Following my ‘snake’-encounter, I spent more time engaged in observation, reflection and reading, and writing: using poetic practice to think through the ideas sparked in my by that encounter and what followed. One output was a prose poem:

A dab of scent between my breasts. A hyacinth in my ear. My knees are clustered with the straps of leaves, eyes of toads, there’s a weta perched on my forehead, a dugite about my neck. You tell me it’s metaphor, but I see you you catch flies to

<sup>2</sup> Elaine Scarry’s famous *The Body in Pain: the making and unmaking of the world* (1985) provides a convincing argument that pain depletes the capacity for language. In an interview with Elizabeth Smith she suggests that pleasure may, by contrast, be language-building (2006: 224). In either case, however, it is valid to argue that at moments of encounter with reality (or, indeed, the Real), language retreats, and only subsequently can it be reached for and deployed in a more sophisticated manner than the monosyllables that are characteristic of intense pleasure or pain.

feed the toads and mice to feed the snakes; I see you cut the hyacinths and arrange them in jam jars; and all through the house, and everywhere I walk, there's the scent of summer. (Webb 2018: 57)

What my Dewey moment generated was, therefore, thought about the contingency of life, and then consideration of human imbrication in the natural environment, and what affordances that might offer. It connects and contributes to my ongoing investigations into the relationship between the arts community and the broader social field: about ethical actions and political interventions. Terri Bird writes:

By inhabiting ... undecidability art remains open to the force of differing, an incalculable exteriority in excess of what is knowable ... Reconceiving the relations of matter as an encounter with an outside that provokes thought exposes the political potential of art practices. (2011: 6-7)

My poem is not my research, but an expression that emerged from my research into creativity, materiality and politics. And this is not uncommon, for artist-researchers, who are typically mobilised and motivated by particular issues, problems, ideas, which will necessarily emerge in creative as well as research practice. US Poet Laureate Tracy K Smith articulates this relationship between the making of poetry and the investment of the self in social processes and understandings:

I see the poet as someone who has made a commitment not just to self-expression, but to an active and an eager listening to the world and the voices outside of the self. The poet is willing to be changed by the things that language can reveal—about who we are, how we live, what our impact upon the world and one another is. (Smith 2017)

Not just self-expression, but active listening, eager listening, reflective engagement, close attention; these are elements of creative research, generating the ability to stand aside from the verities of culture, and to see alternative perspectives, understanding that we cannot grasp the 'whole truth', and that we live not in *ideas about the thing*, but in *the thing itself*: in material contexts.

### Material poetics / poetry and matter

Matter and its relationships matter to a great many poets: Francis Ponge, famously 'the poet of things', produced a book-length poem titled *Soap* (1998) which takes

that most humble of objects, that least durable of objects, and attends closely both to its being, and to what that being might mean. One small section reads:

There is so much to say about soap. Precisely everything that it tells about itself until the complete disappearance, the exhaustion of the subject. This is just the object suited to me. (1998: 13)

I imagine the *aha* moment when Ponge noticed soap as a thing-in-itself, and began to wonder about it; the months of observation and practice when he handled soap, recorded its texture, its movements, its thingliness; when he began to test out lines and phrases that would allow him to explore soap in its being, and to find a way, however hesitantly, however limited, of impressing these insights on his readers.

Zbigniew Herbert is another such poet, one who attends closely to the everyday. His poem "Five Men" (1968: 58-60), about an execution, starts with:

*They take them out in the morning  
to the stone courtyard  
and put them against the wall*

*five men  
two of them very young  
the others middle-aged  
nothing more  
can be said about them*

Across the rest of the poem, Herbert returns again and again to the presence of the felt world: the light; the colour of wall, and sky; the smell of smoke. It is an arresting poem, that locates in the body the shock to society and to culture that is occasioned by brutal government. Such intense focus on the quotidian is present also in his 'Pebble' (Herbert 1968: 108), which begins:

*The pebble  
is a perfect creature*

*equal to itself  
mindful of its limits*

and ends with

—*Pebbles cannot be tamed  
to the end they will look at us  
with a calm and very clear eye*

This is not the pathetic fallacy criticised by John Ruskin (1872), because it is not sentimental; it does not assert inner knowledge about the emotional life of a non-sentient object; it merely observes, reflects, and reports.

Herbert's work here and in other poems is profoundly observational and phenomenological; he has *felt* the topics of which he writes; he knows the field; and, as Charles Simic notes, "He didn't arrive at that knowledge just by reading books". Herbert lived through the second world war and though the Soviet regime; and perhaps because of the attendant need to be alert to the contexts in which he lived, he "strove to make words mean what they mean. For Herbert, a bird is a bird, slavery means slavery, a knife is a knife, death remains death" (Simic 2007).

Simic's observations are expanded by Herbert's own words, in a conversation about his life and work:

Life is like knitting: one has to attach the old thread to the new. Before we descend to the grave, the garment should be fit to wear. One has to know what kind of garment it is, which parts of it are poorly made and which are of better quality. It is important to realize that about one's own life, and also about the life of that nation or society in which one's private life was spent. (Herbert 1995)

This statement contains, albeit in non-scholarly prose, a very clear idea about what we now call creative research: about the knowing that is required to keep working, about both *techne*, or the craft of shaping; and *poesis*, or the making. "All art as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is", writes Heidegger, "is as such *essentially poetry* ... the setting-into-work of truth" (1971: 72, 74; emphasis in original). Unshackling poetry from the law of high art and attaching it instead to a 'letting happen', to the 'what is', can perhaps awaken poets and readers to the ordinary, the quotidian; and can shine a new, if muted, light on the everyday.

And after all, the everyday is where most of us live, most of the time; and it is surely as worthy of attention as are high philosophical thoughts or the glorious im-

aginations of quantum physics. It is, moreover, accessible to writers, no matter their resources: we do not have to travel to the Mediterranean or the Amazon to find materials. Jen Crawford, after having her first child, wrote a prose poem:

he turns his hand and brushes the back of it against the back of mine. he lifts his hand then does that again. he reaches up and clasps the seam of my vest between his thumb and fingers. he pulls his hand away. he reaches up and does that again. he watches his hand and separates his fingers. he watches my hand and opens his fist, then closes his fist. he closes his fist around my finger. he opens his hand. he closes his hand around his hand then around one finger. he opens his hand. he brushes his hand against my chest. he lifts his hand and then softly he does that again. (Crawford 2015: 86)

She says of this poem:

I sometimes wondered in this period how to begin writing about an experience which was both mundane and utterly consuming. Flourishes of language of any kind did not seem true to the real nature of those stretched out hours, their circumscription, their intensified focus and their repletion. ... yet there was also a desire to 'keep' an experience which, for all its 'sameness', was constantly changing form and (moment by moment, week by week) slipping away. My search for the language of this poem was a search for a way of knowing and addressing that constancy of emergence and loss. (Crawford 2017: 9)

This kind of poetry — finely observed, naked, characterised by a linguistic austerity — is attuned to what Paul Carter calls 'material thinking' (2004). This thinking is what we do in the process of making work: think according to more than one language, vocabulary, syntax — we think with material and matter, and pursue such questions as 'what matter/s'?

## Conclusion

"Making," writes Cameron Tonkinwise, "involves working with materials. It involves a knowing about materials ... [and] what materials can be made to become" (2008). For poets, the material is language; words, syntax and grammar, punctuation, line breaks. To make poetry, and hence to undertake the sort of work that is required by practice-led research, it is vital to know how to use language because it constructs an environment, as Heidegger suggested when he wrote, "Poetic creation, which lets us dwell, is a kind of building" (1971: 213). Following this logic, writ-

ing in a way that is material thinking is necessarily a material practice; it exploits the materiality of language, thought and idea to make a space in which to dwell. Thus, if poets are to address the problem of 'what matter/s', or to answer Critchley's question — 'what is the relation between our words and the world to which those words seem to refer?' (Critchley 2004: 215) — then it is important to take seriously, and treat respectfully, the words and spaces we put together to make poems.

William Carlos Williams, famous for his insistence that "for the poet there are no ideas but in things" (Williams 1992), takes this a step further. For him, the lived world has its own language/s — languages that humans cannot parse; and together they comprise "the substance of the poem". But this substance is not easily won; it is a struggle against poor words, unsayable phrases. Williams continues: "the poem is also the search of the poet for his language, his own language which I ... had to use to write at all" (Williams 1992: xiv). The language/s of objects are not available to human writers; and therefore the task is to manage and mould language; structure thinking and feeling through words; articulate the inarticulable. In doing this, language is altered, words put into new context, phrases take on new nuances. With each new articulation, poets add to the language, and change it, however subtly; and are themselves changed by it. But crucially, if as poets we attempt to structure and express knowledge, we lose:

At the moment when language, as spoken and scattered words, becomes an object of knowledge, we see it reappearing in a strictly opposite modality: a silent, cautious deposition of the word upon the whiteness of a piece of paper, where it can possess neither sound nor interlocutor, where it has nothing to say but itself, nothing to do but shine in the brightness of its being. (Foucault 1973: 326-27)

Knowledge does not exist in the poem. All that exists there, really, is the brightness of language and its being. But in and from that brightness it is possible to translate between being and meaning, between feeling and understanding. It is a game worth playing, a struggle worth the pain. As Randall Jarrett concludes, reflecting on Williams' constant attention to the 'truth of things': "how wonderful and unlikely that this extraordinary mixture of the most delicate lyricism of perception and feeling with the hardest and homeliest actuality should ever have come into being!" (Jarrell 1999: 70).

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