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University of Cape Town

# Walkabout

2009 – 2011

A pocket guide by Josh Ginsburg

Documentation and commentary on the body of practical  
work submitted for the degree of Master of Fine Art.

Faculty of Humanities  
University of Cape Town  
2011

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signed: \_\_\_\_\_ date: \_\_\_\_\_

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For Ella, who inspires me to go further.

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Ginsburg (event), Morland (photo). 2011. *Conversation(s)two*  
(Arena Theatre, Cape Town)

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# 1

## 1.1 Walkabout

This book is an introduction to the event *Walkabout*.

The word walkabout is commonly used within the context of fine art to denote the guided discussion of an artwork, often lead by the artist, while in the presence of it. *Walkabout* is in one sense just that, however it involves no walking and there are no material objects in the gallery to which the discussion directs. Rather, the artwork to which *Walkabout* refers occupies an essentially mental space of ideas and thought – immaterial and constantly in flux.

During the event, I act as an interface to the ephemeral artwork, first presenting a digitally projected tour that traces its evolution and then providing the opportunity for conversation born from questions or comments. To facilitate either the prompting or diversion of discussion, each participant receives a series of customized playing cards.

The ambition of *Walkabout* is to conjure the artwork in the minds of the participants; for an *impression* of a process to emerge through contact with the many discrete elements presented in the encounter.

Incidentally, the word walkabout also has a more colloquial reference to the traditional rites of passage undertaken by

Aboriginal boys as they wander through the Australian outback living in the image of their ancestors. In many respects, this project has been such a wandering for me.

This book aims to say what I can about that process.

## 1.2 On writing

“It is very easy to imagine someone knowing his way about a city quite accurately, i.e. he finds the shortest way from one part of the city to another quite surely – and yet he should be perfectly incapable of drawing a map of the city. That is, as soon as he tries, he only produces something completely wrong” (Wittgenstein in Schalkwyk 2004: 61).

It is important to note at the outset that writing a document of this kind, one that attempts to stabilize or ground thoughts, is in stark opposition to the impulse of the larger project, where the general inclination has been to keep ideas evolving and in flight. Additionally, attempting to articulate this process without the hypermedia system that I have been exploring for exactly this purpose (as will become clear in the discussion that follows) has proved to be a significant and accordingly productive challenge.

Following various experiments with more fragmented forms, forms that I initially felt could better reflect the flux of the process under consideration, I settled on the attempt to draw as short and straight a line as possible through the available network of ideas. In the end, pushing thoughts through the material of words into paragraphs and pages in a deliberate and single order has offered insights into the activities that, presumably, would not have been visible in any other way.

This document was written while still within a process. I remain *in the game*. Its aim is therefore to offer an impression of *how* the game is played rather than an explanation of its meaning within a wider discourse. Voluntarily operating without a consistently distant vantage point, the text that follows is unable to stand back and appraise the project, offering broad insights or an overarching conclusion. Similarly without a theoretical proposition to assert, it should be treated more as a report than as a thesis – a reflexive output or reading of an ongoing process at a particular moment in time.

The images embedded on the pages that follow, many of which are recognizable artworks, were selected according to associations that arose while writing. Chosen on impulse and without the expectation of a defined relation to the text, they are only occasionally referred to directly. Although seemingly insignificant, or at least supplementary, this is noted here as an allusion to the character of the project. Ideally, the associative logic of the images and their proximity to written ideas should facilitate the formation of unexpected relationships, providing the opportunity for something else, other than what I have been able to say in writing, to be shown through the process of reading.



Ray, Man. 1920. *Enigma of Isodore Ducasse*

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# 2

## 2.1 Thought acts

To begin with, this project emerged from an interest in thought as the private and internal operations of mind. More directly, in how ideas are formed, stored or recalled, and how they evolve.

This interest was fostered in part by a growing anxiety associated with incomplete, unrealized ideas hoarded and lying dormant in piles of notebooks in cupboards, or nested in files deep on a hard drive. Importantly, this anxiety stemmed more from a fear of non-completion rather than from simply forgetting the thoughts themselves. In response, hoping to inspire or necessitate the resolution of these unfinished thoughts, I had effectively begun to resist new imaginings. This logic was however largely ineffectual, like scooping handfuls of water from the hull of a rapidly sinking boat.

A more constructive response to the problem appeared in part through an encounter with the artist George Brecht's 'Event Scores' of the 1960s, comprising short instructional texts on cards. As Julia Robinson (2009: 105) explains, "simply to read an Event Score and reflect upon it without acting, already constitutes an adequate realization".

Rather than the perceiving of an idea as the mere potential for a future embodiment, what if the idea itself was considered as the articulation, fully realized simply by being privately conjured up in a thought?

# TWO VEHICLE EVENTS

- **start.**
- **stop.**

**Summer, 1961**

Brecht, George. 1961. *Two Vehicle Events*

In *The Stranger*, Albert Camus (1993: 79) writes of a prisoner who bides his time by navigating memories of his old room, always deepening the detail of the memory with finer characteristics; the objects, their cracks, scratches and so on. As the protagonist describes, "...the more I thought about it, the more I dug out of my memory things I had overlooked or forgotten. I realized then that a man who had only lived one day could easily live for a hundred years in prison". In addition to the sense of calm rather than anxious recollection, there seemed to me something sustainable (and desirable) about fulfillment born from quiet and private mental activities. Further, an opportunity appeared to exploit my inclination for reflection by turning thinking into journeying, journeying that could be achieved perfectly independently and without material obstruction. To this effect, Martin Heidegger (1976: xiii) poetically writes "to think is to be underway".

The combination of the above ideas began a shift in my interest from the essentially public manifestations of 'finished' ideas, works or thoughts, to the private process of thinking itself as an activity – where to think is to do.

## 2.2 Disorder

“The whole universe interests me” (Brecht in Johnston 2006).

Returning to the 'unfinished' ideas, now conceived differently as fragmented and haphazard articulations of thought, I observed that the prohibitively closed or obstructive structures of their storage remained a problem. The stacking or nesting structures that had restricted access to the ideas as things to be completed were in a sense also restricting the capacity of each idea to perform freely across contexts, to act and interact. Notes on till slips, on my phone, on my hand, books of writing, sketches, conversations, photos and videos etc., all appeared isolated from one another, passive and static.

I began looking for ways to mobilize already documented ideas, to liberate, for example, a written note from the confines of a single page covered by other pages and again by other books. For the ideas to mature, the articulations in the various media needed freedom of movement, to make contact with each another.

In a short story titled *The man who never threw anything away*, Ilya Kabakov (1977: 37) writes that a garbage “dump not only devours everything, preserving it forever, but one might say it also continuously generates something”. The dump ‘generates’ as a function of its inherent chaos: objects born of entirely different

contexts are jumbled together, without category or hierarchy, allowing relationships to continually form and separate. From one perspective a heap may seem to be a tomb, from another, it is an incubator or a greenhouse breathing life into its objects, providing them the opportunity to connect with others and to be repurposed. In doing the heap itself becomes a dynamic living system, creating precisely because of (rather than in spite of) its willingness for disorder.



Alÿs, Francis. 1990–1992. *The Collector*

“For an indeterminate period of time, the magnetized collector takes a daily walk through the streets and gradually builds up a coat made of any metallic residue in its path. This process goes on until the collector is completely smothered by its trophies” (Francis Alÿs in Cuauhtémoc 2007).

If I had applied the logic of a garbage heap to my notebooks by cutting all of the notes into independent elements and jumbling them together, interesting relationships born from chance relationships would indubitably occur. However, this process would also mean abandoning useful organizing principles inherent

in the structure of the notebooks themselves. The chronology, for example, would be disassembled, and with it the ability to find a note by date, or similarly, the ability to determine something of a note's context within a broader timeline. In this example, because of the notebook's material substance, the potential yields of chaos and order, or of chaos and stasis, are mutually exclusive.



Containers, Salt River, Cape Town (cellphone photo)

On a practical level the flexibility of a digital system comprising digitized notes offers a solution, enabling the ideas to move and shift without losing an embedded history of their overall trajectory. One could digitally 'throw' the notes into a heap, mess them about, building relationships and new ideas – and then, with a click of a button, have them snugly back in their original place in the digital notebook with all the desirable properties of the ordered notebook intact.

The characteristics of order and disorder are not neatly correspondent to either the stack or nesting logic of notebook filled cupboards or the logic of the garbage heap – each of which could from different perspectives be considered chaotic, or static, or both. Combined with a consideration of the digital system as a middle ground between the two, the distinction is made here to emphasize both the flexibility of relationships between ideas (as context) and to highlight the issue of accessibility. As will become clearer below, the key feature of the digital system is its capacity to employ the powerful agent of disorder without undermining other important structures.

### 2.3 Emergence

While an undergraduate student in engineering, I encountered mathematical models that deliberately inject random elements into orderly logical systems. In the same way that notes thrown into a disorderly mess make it possible for otherwise dislocated concepts to constructively merge, random components within the rigorous logic provide the opportunity to shortcut the process of finding a solution.

The particular models to which I am referring are called Genetic Algorithms and fall within the broader study of Complex Adaptive Systems. Complex Adaptive Systems comprise strategies that look to harness the haphazard inherent in complex systems rather than try to filter it out as an uncontrollable or destructive force. They are premised on the *emergence* of solutions from within a process as opposed to the imposition of a solution derived from rigorous analysis alone.



Cage, John. 1968. *Reunion*

*Reunion* (1968) featured John Cage playing two chess matches against the Duchamp's, first Teeney and then Marcel, on a stage and before a live audience. Configured electronically, each piece placed upon the chessboard emitted an electronic signal that was subsequently transmitted through a group of 'manipulators' (including Cage's long time collaborator, pianist David Tudor). Creating a soundscape of augmented signals, the manipulators effectively enabled the play of the game to compose the music (paraphrased from Cross 1999: 35–42).

In *Tools for Thinking*, David Brooks (2011) writes that "...emergent systems are bottom-up and top-down simultaneously". Consider, for example, the urban commute infrastructure of London and Cape Town; the Underground and the minibus taxi systems respectively. In London, instituting the Underground was a top-down assertion. Infrastructure was imposed on the city, thereby imposing patterns of movements on the commuters. People choose jobs, homes, and leisure activities based on the imposed system. In one respect the system is brilliantly efficient. It is however a *fixed* system, unable to accommodate adaptations to commuter trends. As a result, social development is most likely to attach to the skeleton of the tube line – a skeleton that while expandable cannot bend.



Detail of the London Underground map

The minibus taxi system in Cape Town was born from rather different conditions. Almost completely unregulated in its formative years, the minibus taxis established routes from the bottom-up based on the trends of commuters. Years later, these routes have been institutionalized and taxis are now expected to follow them.

However, given the relatively poor methods of policing, taxis do stray from the preset paths, augmenting their routes to accommodate the changing needs of commuters. In all likelihood, these augmented routes will in time be institutionalized. Through iterations of unregulated route deviation, and then formalization of the augmentations, the mini-bus taxi system organically evolves from the bottom-up and the top-down; it is a system characterized by responsiveness and the capacity to adapt.

Axelrod and Cohen (2004: 42) consider the application of an 'emergent strategy' to a process through a discussion of 'exploitation' and 'exploration'. Introduced as strategies of harnessing complexity, exploration refers to a *variety* of approaches to a given problem while exploitation refers to the expansion of a particular trend that has shown promise. Too much in the way of exploration, they term 'eternal boiling' – as in the case of boiling water, the system remains in permanent disorder and any

“potentially valuable structures are broken apart before they can be effectively put to use” (43). In contrast, too much in the way of exploitation is termed ‘premature convergence’. This occurs when an idea is pursued or exploited before a sufficiently wide variety of potentially more effective options are generated.

Complex Adaptive Systems possess the capacity to balance the proportion of exploration and exploitation by virtue of feedback mechanisms. Effectively ‘managing’ a symbiotic relationship between order and chaos, these systems are, in essence, highly iterative, self-reflexive processes of action, reflection and adaptation.

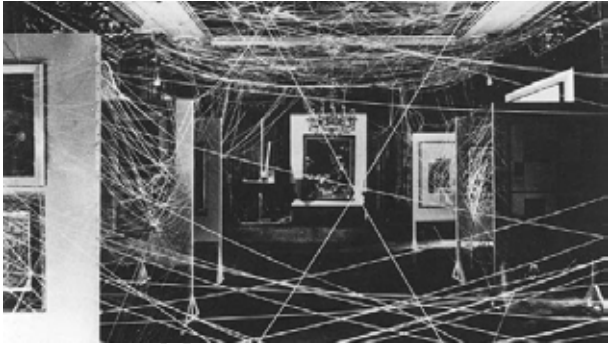


Charles Mingus, Iconic jazz bass player. (from the *Finest Hour* album cover).

The social networking tool Facebook is an example of such a system. As individuals connect themselves to friends, they form relational networks. As individuals interact with one another, their respective relational networks intersect. Through adaptive design, Facebook is able to autonomously respond to these changing

conditions and, for example, 'recommend' additional individuals as 'people you may know'. If a user agrees and adds a friend as the result of a recommendation, the individual's network expands *and* Facebook's own feedback mechanism is updated.

Complex Adaptive Systems like Facebook essentially learn through iteration and adapt not only the emphasis of their operations (like altering the schedule of underground trains based on rush hour traffic) but also the internal structure of the system itself (like changing the orientation of the train tracks altogether).



Duchamp, Marcel. 1942. *Sixteen miles of string*

Consider the case of the digital system of digitized notes discussed in section 2.2, where components are able to effortlessly fragment, jumble and reassemble. Employing the above-mentioned strategy would mean reflecting on the chance relationships that occur in the fragmentation phase, and, if relevant combinations occur, exploiting them to form relational networks. In practice these networks would become like memory maps of fleeting encounters between notes. Weaving through the system and, like well-trodden and ill-trodden paths through a forest, provide a means to navigate the complex terrain.

To reiterate, the achievements within this imagining, the digital system no longer hosts notes of singular concretized value dependent on ordered positioning. Nor are the notes stripped of any contextual meaning through total chaos. Rather, they exist in flux between these two states, empowered to act, to mean, through their interaction. Enabling the collapse of a *fixed* or top-down imposed hierarchy, the digital system creates the opportunity for any note, even those that appear insignificant initially, to contribute to the emergence of others as groups or as paths.

With only a sense of the digital system as an adaptive system, a system with the capacity to grow through feedback and measured exploitation, my attraction to emergent strategies thus inspired the development of a digital, networked, and archival process for thoughts. Reaching back to the anxiety described in section 2.1, I felt that if I could build a system that didn't just store ideas, but created as a function of them – then I would be encouraged to have ideas. That is, be encouraged to openly engage with the world around me in the knowledge that my sporadic and haphazard thoughts – materializing in notes of one media or another – were directly or indirectly evolving the system and not simply propagating mental noise.



Allora and Calzadilla. 2004. *Returning a sound*

## 2.4 The private joy of seeing the world

The development of the process described above – the imagining and gradual construction of a dynamic and evolving archive for thoughts – functioned and continues to function as an exceptionally flexible framework. A framework that simultaneously inspires, records and maintains the emergence of ideas as an activity, allowing its user to ‘look through it to the world beyond’ (Cage in Joseph 1997:91).



Ginsburg, Jared. 2010. *Film of Drawing*

The film pictured above comprised a series of ink drawings performed on camera by Jared Ginsburg. Each drawing originally ended being completely blackened out. Ginsburg then reversed half of the short filmic clips and inserted them intermittently within the remaining half. The film thereby played as drawings emerging from a clean slate moving eventually to blackness and then from the blackness, a drawing emerged from the ink dispersing as the film reversed the process; a making and an unmaking.

The logic of such a framework is in part analogous to the score of John Cage’s *4’33”* (1952). The score for *4’33”* instructs performers not to make any intentional sounds and to sit silently for four

minutes and thirty-three seconds. The ambient sound of the performance space – shuffling agitated audiences, chairs creaking, wind, electrical hum, breathing or coughing – stands in for and becomes the composition. As with much of Cage’s work, *4’33’’* deflects the pointed attention normally reserved for art to the everyday (see Robinson 2009).

Two aspects of this work are particularly appealing here. The first is the derivation of a structure – a score – that when performed, frames and invigorates the mundane. The second is the capacity to apply that structure outside of its formal performance as an artwork, to stand in the street for example and listen to the traffic as if it were a composition. In this position the artwork acts like a philosophical aphorism or maxim, framing and thereby enabling interaction with the world.

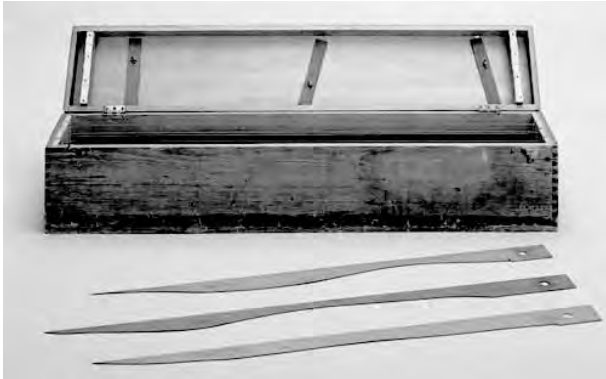


Kopystiansky, Igor and Svetlana. 1996–1997. *Incidents* (installation)

Collected as filmic segments over a two-year passage on the streets of New York, the Kopystiansky’s film comprises a montage of individual elements of garbage moving in the wind.

## 2.5 Strategies for Searching infinite Spaces (SSiS)

Ludwig Wittgenstein (1980: 24) wrote that “philosophy ought only to be written as a form of poetry”. This is a gesture to a powerful symbiotic relationship between logic and poetics working together to express what neither could necessarily achieve alone.



Duchamp, Marcel, 1913–1914. *3 Standard Stoppages*

In a certain sense, the dynamic suggested by Wittgenstein’s proposition reflects my sustained interest in emergent systems. Emergent systems possess the capacity to harness contingency by pairing the apparently dissimilar systems of rigorous logic and random deviations within one closed system. To a large extent, the appeal of this pairing functions on the level of a sense or *impression* of this symbiotic process – of both the predictable trot of logic and the wild roaming of uncertainty working together as an odd couple. As referred to in section 2.3, my encounter with these ideas was as an engineering student where I was able to witness this relationship play out. I recall sitting mesmerized in front of a computer screen as it graphed the advancements, watching how on countless occasions a plateau was suddenly left for dead as random

mutations breathed new life into the evolving process.

The undergraduate engineering course was however largely (and necessarily) unable to accommodate this form of interest and it was consequentially considered to be a distraction. Distinct from this scientifically informed framework, the space of artistic research, or simply art itself, has provided an alternate and complimentary mode of experimentation where the *process* of the emergent systems (rather than just its achievements) could be explored on its own terms.



Morland, Kyle. 2010. *Africa Aerospace & Defence, Rising to new dimensions 5*

Significantly, the subjectively assumed correspondence (again on the level of sense) between logic and random deviation as a dynamic relationship, and logic and poetics as a dynamic relationship, could also be accommodated within this new space of reflexive experimentation. As a fine art masters student, I have since been able to observe that the dynamic I was interested in exploring was in fact at play both within the object of study (the

emergent system as a process) and within the study itself (my own process within the MFA program) and therefore effective as a tool to study my process of studying it as well as the entire process as a whole (the process being studied, the process of the study, the study of the process of the study etc.).

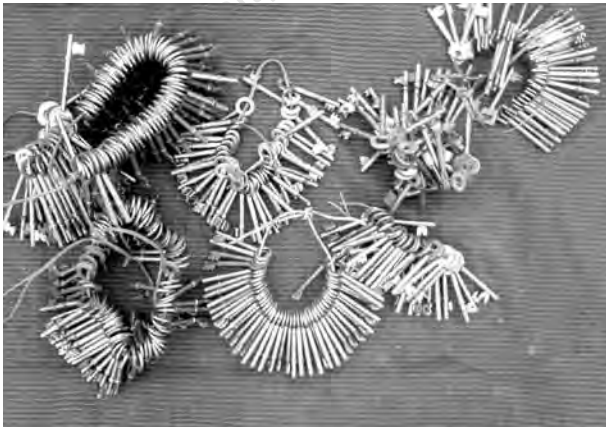


Opie, Julian. 1998-1999. *Imagine you are driving*

To pause the exponential expansion of emergence as a framework at the limits of my own life (as a process), or rather, my experience of and interaction with the world, I understand my own exploration to be in the image of Wittgenstein's suggestion, quoted above, albeit with a somewhat inverted emphasis. I use art as a tool for enquiry, equipment to probe the world hoping to return an augmented awareness that can facilitate my living it. In this respect, the process of art making is for me a form of philosophical wandering – a constant and non-hierarchical interplay of action, feedback and reflection.

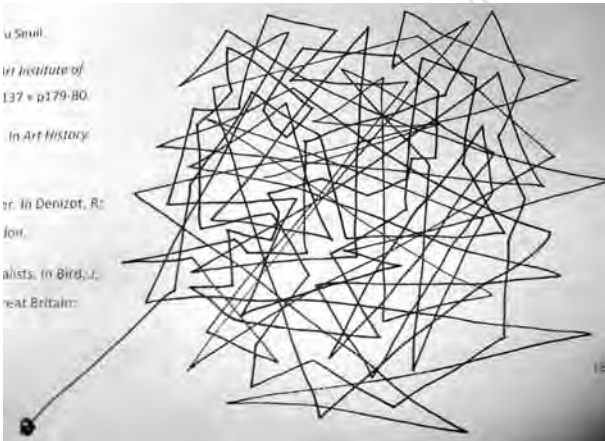
But how can one sustain such a wandering – one that acknowledges the constructive potential of uncertainty, but is also mindful of the psychological implications of aimless meandering?

Consider, for example, the case of the librarians in Jorge Louis Borges' short story *The Library of Babel* (1962). The library that Borges imagines is comprised of all possible combinations of letters inscribed in an infinite number of 410-paged books. The result is a labyrinth library of all knowledge – past, present and future. The complete story of one's life for example, is neatly transcribed in a book somewhere on a shelf. Yet what the library gains in expanse it sacrifices in legibility and functionality. For every text in the library, there exists an infinite number of near perfect facsimiles: texts with subtle, even minute variations (differences of single letters or words). Finding a true text, one that accurately (or at least functionally) describes states of affairs in the world, is rendered all but impossible, beset by falsity and randomness, shapes without meaning.



Keys, Milnerton Market, Cape Town. (cellphone photo)

Borges describes one desperate strategy employed by the librarians: if all texts exist, a book exists comprising the locations of all the information one might require, a book of directions, a map or an index: “to locate Book A, consult first a Book B which indicates A’s position; to locate Book B consult first a Book C, and so on to infinity...” (56). Infinity ultimately plagues the librarians, they trawl the labyrinth, haphazardly reaching to the shelves, pulling books from it, despondently returning them to continue a life of looking with little in the way of finding. How then could the librarians somehow find peace in their journeys? What offering could soothe their state of mind?



A random walk (cellphone photo, notebooks)

Pyrrhonism is an ancient Greek philosophy, credited as the foundation of skepticism and based on the impossibility of certain knowledge. The proposition is therefore that happiness or contentment is only plausible through the acceptance of that fact. As Lance Herman (2010: 25) explains, the Pyrrhonic skeptic “reminds himself always that he does not know; and so remains

always in a state of inquiry, searching for knowledge but not admitting of knowledge, philosophizing without end, hoping, if for nothing else, that his incessant philosophical wandering might congeal into a satisfying form of life: that he may make peace with himself as a questing mind that will not find peace”.

What if it were possible to somehow convince Borge’s librarians of this method? Would the repositioning of their function from the need to find something particular enable them to give up their impossible search for either Book C, Book B or Book A? If, for example, value could be found in the act of reaching for a book, in searching itself, then perhaps they could be energized to continue without despondence. Importantly, the imposition of this process is not in fact in opposition to the process already underway. The book that they were hoping for may still end up in their laps, but they will not be waiting in desperation for it to arrive.

This is perhaps the essence of this project’s ambition – the rule, or intention placed at the helm of the emergent process – to prize indeterminate searching as an end in itself, and to be alert to what could (but equally could not) emerge from the process.



Samuel Becket in rehearsal for 1961 production of *Waiting for Godot*  
(photo by Roger Pic)

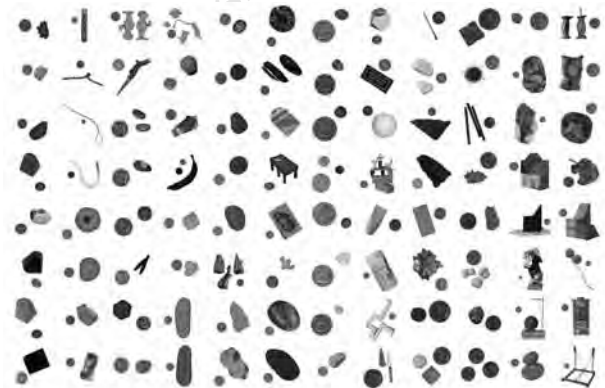
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# 3

## 3.1 The System

The discussion thus far has referred inconsistently to a 'hypermedia system', a 'digital system', a 'digital network archive of thoughts', and an 'evolving archive for thought'. The following section aims at a more focused explanation of what this variously labeled 'system' actually is. Note, however, that the system is hereon referred to equally inconsistently as a 'database', a 'complex database', a 'networked database', an 'archive', an 'adaptive archive', a 'digital archive', a 'digital network', and finally as a 'networked idea space'.

Over the past two years a complex networked database has evolved comprising  $\pm 30\,000$  discrete digital elements (still, video, text and sound) that I have individually collected or made.



Burger, Francis. 2009–2010. *The Indulgence and Exhaustion of the Meaningless Voice* (detail)

The database is primarily accessed through and made accessible by a freely downloadable Google product called Picasa. On entry into the database, each element is annotated through Picasa with an array of keywords. These digital annotations are called tags and are embedded in the architecture of the image file itself as metadata. Images are thereby searchable in terms of their added tags, as well as their file names and other technical data such as their date of creation, modification or, occasionally, geographical information.

It is useful to consider tags to be like a set of tentacles, each extending off an image file. Connecting the like tentacles of individual image files to one another establishes relational networks like those discussed in section 2.3. These networks allow complex relationships between elements without the need for assortments of images in separate folders or duplicates of files across the hard drive.



Michaelis studio wall (photo by Kyle Morland)

Through image collection and management software platforms like Picasa, tags are popularly used to identify names of people in images or large groupings like 'landscape', 'portrait' etc. A significant difference observed within my process is the willingly idiosyncratic, associative and subjective tagging of files entering the database. This intensified tagging process was impelled by the recognition that when looking for something (a specific image from a camping trip up the West Coast for example) many oblique properties come to mind (a tyre that burst on the way up, a birthday party missed while there, an orange tent) without assisting whatsoever in finding the image in question.



Pippa Skotnes' office library (cellphone photo)

The collection is organized by colour to facilitate finding a book based on a memory of what it looks like.

Considering the heterogeneous combinations of images, words, names, sounds and places that occur in the mind's eye when recalling or thinking about something (the colour of a jersey worn by someone whose name is lost to memory for example)

I began embedding oblique references in image files. Mimicking, to a certain extent, what appeared to me to be the mechanics of my memory.

Instituted religiously as a mandatory process, my tagging methodology comprised four questions asked of each image that entered the database: 1) Why was it gathered?; 2) What do I see in the image?; 3) What associations arise from engagement with the image?; 4) What additional associations would arise if the image or the content that it pictures had to be located within an art gallery (or viewed as art)?



Paik, Nam June. 1974. *TV Buddha*

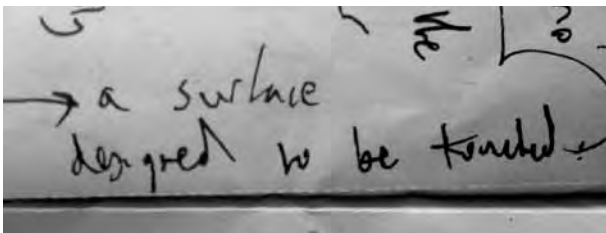
By exploiting the collection of formal and oblique references embedded in them as metadata, this idiosyncratic tagging process – born of associations that arise through *my* engagement with each element – facilitates my immediate access to the disparate

elements. Rather than scrolling through nested folders, often to frustratingly dead-ends, searching in this framework constitutes honing in on the target using as many associations as necessary. In opposition to the hierarchical filing systems that characterize most personal digital archives, the result is a dynamic archive with *subjective association* as its organizing principle.



Finder, Apple Mac, hierarchical file organization application (screenshot)

Fortuitously, archived elements with common tags form virtual collections that are not necessarily manually collated, but self-organize based on conceptual ‘family resemblances’ (see Wittgenstein 1953: 31–32). The example of the collection defined by the tag ‘bag of shapes to touch’ (tags may consist of more than one word) is useful to explain this further. In 2010 at the Guggenheim in Venice, I encountered Umberto Boccioni’s *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* (1913) as part of a futurist exhibition. My immediate urge was to touch the sculpture (actually to hug it), to feel its curves, its finish and its form. Given that touching the sculpture was not encouraged, I settled with writing a note in a notebook, standing next to the sculpture:



A surface designed to be touched (cellphone photo, notebook)

Over the next few days I wondered more about touch as an activity, and at one point imagined a bag of shapes to touch. That phrase became a tag that continues (even now) to be added whenever something (in the database or in the world) is somehow associated to the evolving inquiry. Importantly, and in correspondence with the discussion of ‘thought acts’ in section 2.1., the collection ‘bag of shapes to touch’ is not aimed at assisting the eventual construction of a literal bag of shapes to touch. The expanding collection of images together is the idea, or thought act. In this respect, the idea is both realized by the collection and continuously in flux by virtue of the changing shape of the collection through the addition or subtraction of images.



Bag of shapes to touch, 4 May 2011 (screenshot)

Although I am solely responsible for tagging each element in the database (giving it *valency*, a willingness to react with others), the collections themselves form with a relative autonomy. I did not deliberately search the database and assemble the images for the collection of ‘bag of shapes to touch’, rather, the collection emerged gradually over time and through interaction with my broader environment. Throughout the database are hosts of continuously evolving collections corresponding to evolving ideas. While the dynamic archive was principally conceived to store and make available ideas *I* deposit, it began, by virtue of its highly networked

form, to ideas generate from within. This is again in correspondence with an earlier discussion, namely the interactive agency of notes within a digital system in sections 2.2 and 2.3.

The atomic data unit of the archive is the image; text files are rendered into image format; video files are searchable based on their still icon; sound files have images attached to them and are rendered into a 'still movies', thereby giving the sound byte a recognizable visual icon.

Homogenizing to image format was motivated by the logic of the dashboard (the cockpit of an airplane for example), technical arrays that make many elements of complex, ongoing processes visually available so as to allow real-time impressions of the system's status. Being able to *see* data makes it significantly easier and quicker to find. Tour guides often employ this strategy by asking their tour group to wear yellow hats, for example, so that they may be spotted easily within in a crowd.



Jones, Geoffrey. 1970. *This is Shell* (film still)

The features described above allow *me* to search the vast, labyrinthine network with particular fluency. As a function of the database's networked and associative design, related as well as tangential elements appear during searches. This results in the emergence of unexpected nodes upon which to forward and expand an enquiry. In other words, aside from finding the object of a particular search, I encounter things that I wasn't looking for. These 'other things', more often than not contribute to the ambition of the primary search. Additionally, and as will be explained further in section 4.4, I am also able to journey aimlessly or wander through the space of the archive, noting the development of new groups, monitoring the appearance of certain elements in proximity to others or simply touring the elements themselves.



Venice, 2010. (cellphone photo)

To summarize, the system is a networked database that both stores and makes ideas. Its construction is based on the powerful and deceptively simple investment in the highly idiosyncratic process of tagging its contents. The result is a massive jumble that is also expertly navigable.



Beymer, Richard. 2007. Richard Beymer discusses David Lynch's directing style (film still)

Excerpt from dialogue:

Misha: Richard, can you explain the difference between David Lynch's directing style and other directors you've worked with?

Richard: David Lynch doesn't know what the fuck he's doing. That's the big difference. Don't you understand how good that is?

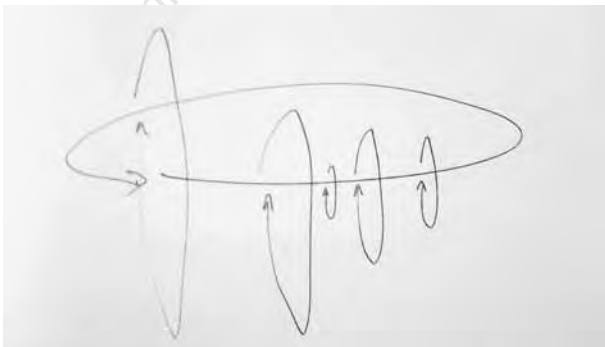
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# 4

## 4.1 To think and speak clearly

“Since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain”  
(Wittgenstein 1953: 126).

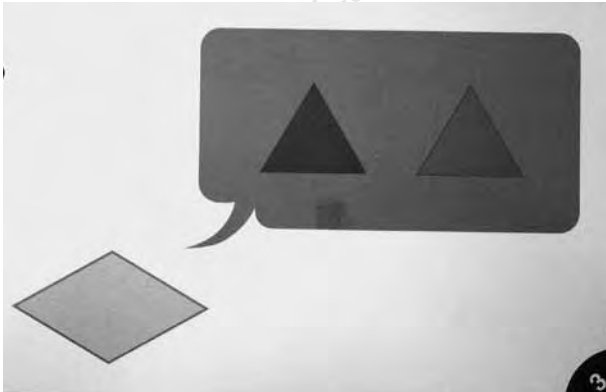
When I walk around the reservoir in the morning, or drive my car through the city, there is often a sense of clarity to my thoughts, a clarity that frustratingly escapes me when I sit down and attempt to capture it in writing. I have since observed an alternate scenario as a combined function of both the capacity of images to translate significant detail, and the speed with which I can access required images within the system described above. Using the system, I am able to effectively track some of these seemingly frictionless trains of thought through sequences of images collected *while* thinking: image sentences.



A morning walk around the reservoir (cellphone photo from notebook)

This should not however imply that I could neatly articulate or translate these thought sequences into text or speech alone. Similar to the way in which one could follow a trail of breadcrumbs dropped during a walk in a forest without necessarily being able to recount their path, I am able to trace the thought only through *reading* the images.

This observation ultimately led to questioning the difference in character between what I can think and what I can say. The fact that I can recount the thought allows me to validate its logic, yet I am still unable to *say* it, that is, publicize what appears to me. Aside from the potential ability of the system to mimic, albeit crudely, the character of thought, this question has bearing on the way in which our language influences what we can and cannot *say* (see Wittgenstein 1922: 30–31).



Brainy Blocks early learning tool (cellphone photo)

Consider the case outlined by J. M. Coetzee (1992: 181–194) in his essay *Isaac Newton and the Ideal of a Transparent Scientific Language*. When Isaac Newton first publicly proposed the

concept of gravitational force, his use of the word 'attract' largely undermined the proportion of his discovery owing to its resonance with the occult. His discovery was thereby considered a regression from the empirical mode championed by the modern scientist. Without the language to accurately describe his thought, Newton (as is now rather common place in science) *imported* the word 'attract', recontextualizing and augmenting its definition in order to offer insight into this new concept. Coetzee (184) describes this word borrowing as a sign of "wrestling to make the thought fit into the language, to make the language express the thought, [or] perhaps even of an incapacity of language to express certain thoughts, or of thought unable to think itself out because of the limitations of the medium". Coetzee (191) wonders further whether Newton might have been able to do "better justice to his thoughts... if he had worked in a linguistic medium radically different from Latin or English".



Serra, Richard. 1967. *To Lift*

Interested in the physical process of making sculpture, Serra experimented with verbs by acting them out on materials. He performed 'to lift' on a piece of pliable rubber.

In light of these gaps and wrestling matches between mediums of meaning, I have come to think of the networked database as a language system of some kind, constituted by discrete images (words) and software (grammar) that allows me to *do better justice to my thoughts*.

Yet, to what extent can this process of mapping thought sequences via the extensive use of images be inverted to exploit images for the purposes of public or even simply interpersonal communication? We are constantly confronted, even affronted, by the exploitation of images with text in advertising and mass media, and of course within image making activities like art or cinema. Yet the relationship between text and image as a communication tool within a more interpersonal, scholarly arena seems strangely undeveloped. Interesting cases do however exist within the realm of digitally assisted interpersonal communication where, as a function of new platforms, there is the opportunity to explore image-assisted communication.



Open door alert icon (cellphone photo)

The digital communication platform Skype is one such example. Originally, Skype was a text-based platform allowing users to write conversations to one another in real-time and online. Later it expanded to allow a real-time video element. In a recent Skype

conversation with a friend in the UK, along with a video connection, we were also trading images and video as we spoke, with the conversation becoming something to this effect:

- 1: 'it's like [ image ]'  
2: 'interesting, I was thinking [ image ]'  
1: 'yes [ video ]'  
etc.

With our digital archives available to us, and platforms to share and view respectively, we were speaking in collaboration with supporting imagery, reducing what we needed to *say* (in words) but enhancing our capacity to show, and I believe, to communicate. The exchange reminded me of the detail that an individual's body language (gestures, hand signals etc.) affords to the transmission of their ideas. In the Skype example, while embodied only to the extent that video allows, gesture was extended through additional media elements. More recently, Skype has added a 'mirror desktop' feature, where one is able to expose one's screen to the other, allowing for a more fluid real-time image exchange.



A Skype conversation using the mirrored desktop feature (screenshot)

In a more scholarly arena, The Alliance for Networking Visual Culture (ANVC), based in the US, is invested in the potential of media heavy communication in academic contexts. The ANVC has designed a software application called Scalar, which allows the swift embedding of digital media to accompany text. MIT press published its first *digital only* book in collaboration with ANVC titled *Learning from YouTube*, by Alexandra Juhasz (2011). The online blurb explains that “YouTube is the subject, form, method, problem, and solution of her video-book: an online inquiry into today’s media. This is not your typical scholarly book (*Learning from YouTube* can never go to paper) Juhasz writes about social media inside and through it” (2001). Juhasz speaks about a medium (YouTube) by using it, offering a simultaneous explanation and documentation through the performance of content that could not be articulated in a traditional scholarly format.

Both Skype and Scalar are developing platforms for rich media augmented or image assisted communication, offering a series of new facilities that this project (and its database) can fluidly employ.



Vertov, Dziga. 1934. *Three songs about Lenin* (film still)

## 4.2 When attitude becomes form

"...artists think the same way chess players think. You know, they have a set number of rules, they make an exhaustive search about probabilities, the way the chessboard is set up. They say: 'Well I can make a move here, a move here, this is bad, this might be good.' They push it two or three moves further and they say: 'Aha, this is what I will do.' This is what recursion is. And it's ... it's really the whole basis of problem solving" (Jack Burnham in Dambeck 2001).

As with the recollection of trains of thought through the image sentences described above, many of the significant developments of this project have been experienced as a kind of conversation with myself. Perhaps the most significant challenge of this project has therefore been the search for a suitable form in which to render it public. What form would not undermine the evolving, transitory and dynamic characteristics that are its principles? What form could present its pursuit of quiet, of privacy and of independence? What form could account for the intrinsically un-shareable affair of thought? How could the integrity of the experiment, to search without prioritizing a resolved end, survive its output?



Various Artists. 1964–65. *Fluxkit* (cellphone photo, MoMA)

Fluxus artworks made to be touched, thrown, lost, burnt, used (now encased in glass).

As embodied by the above questions, the threat of compromise and contradiction has at times appeared to pressure this project from all sides. As a result it has operated for prolonged periods in opposition to the idea of exhibition, or of public display of one kind or another. The pursuit has instead been oriented toward strategies that facilitate my engagement with the world. Strategies that, when stretched, treat as part of their task, the alleviation of the need to voice publically. Within this framework, priority is placed on facilitating the *private joy of seeing the world*, rather than the attempt to derive a public expression from it.

In consequence the process has encouraged negating physical material and prioritizing flux wherever possible, in an effort to value thoughts on their own terms.



Password request (film still)

What then, is a thought? Could I exhibit one of those? Having posed the question of a thought as an artwork in previous forums, the problem of gaps and wrestling matches between forms quickly reappears and invariably sidetracks the investigation. Similar to the difference between musical notes on a page and their performance following the imposition of time, thoughts are allusive and temporal – they occur within a process and their residue remains suggestive.



Beuys, Joseph. 1974. *Untitled* (cellphone photo, MoMA, New York)

Witnessing the successful performance of the system as a communicative tool within the context of private, thought-based communication, I began to take note of contexts that somehow managed to replicate some of the conditions of experiencing thought. The domain of *event*, of activities characterized by their fleeting nature within defined parameters, thereby presented a fertile solution space. It felt possible to move through a process with a real-time performance framework – effectively holding artworks that were never in fact *made* (in a material sense) within the realm of ideas.

Interestingly, my conflict with exhibition was similarly reconciled with the above solution. As will be discussed in detail in section 4.4, the performance of the system as an event did not compromise the fluidity of my communicative relationship with it, and arrived with a host of interactive and generative possibilities. The result was that the performance of the system became a space for it to show itself, if not my own thoughts. I was thereby able to share

something that I felt invested in offering, a potentially empowering tool or strategy that had helped me find degrees of calm in the complex, often overwhelming field of ideas, of media, and of life.



### 4.3 What we speak about when we speak about art

In May 2010, I had the privilege of attending a talk by Matthew Barney at the New Museum in New York where he outlined new work that was in production. With the idea of a performance space for my own event in mind, the form of his presentation led to a series of reflections worth recounting here.



Arthur Ganson presenting his work in a TED Talk (film still)

Presenting within a lecture-focused auditorium, Barney was seated in front of an audience with his laptop. Together with an enormous projection mirroring his screen, he proceeded to calmly describe his process using a scripted array of images and video. The imagery corresponded directly at times with his descriptions (examples of older works, locations etc.) and at other times, moved in a seemingly associative harmony with his speaking (conceptual drawings,

reference images, notes etc.). The talk provided an exceptionally clear and articulate journey through his process of making and the experience for me was of total satisfaction.



Web-browser (screenshot)

Comparative disaster struck, however, when his prepared lecture was over and a question and answer session began. The projector was turned off and a microphone began its zigzag movements across the auditorium to field questions from the audience. As is most often the case in these instances, questions stood in relative isolation from one another, leaving the artist to try and answer succinctly, closing the issue off so as to field another. Barney managed the questions exceptionally well. Yet despite his best efforts this part of the process was flat, rather boring, and in desperate need of some mediation, be it via a human (managing, translating, rephrasing, conversing) or a refined set of organizing rules that at once accommodate the forum and propagate real inventive discussion.

It occurred to me then, and has since repeatedly, that the question and answer sessions popular to these kinds of presentations appear to need some redesign. And perhaps it is the speaker whose responsibility it is to manage these scenarios, to extend their attention beyond the prepared lecture and work to include the conversation component constructively. I questioned the extent to which the logic of his prepared lecture, where he essentially spoke through his images, affected the capacity of the later phase to perform. To what extent were images arising in his mind as he listened to the questions? Essentially, I wondered how Barney's responses would have differed if he had available to him *his* image archive with the kind of immediacy I do mine. With my own project

in mind, the contrast between the journey of the lecture and the rather stationary question and answer session was rather exciting. In spite of, or possibly as a result of, the altogether different set of intentions assumed within an explanatory session (as opposed to the performance of the work itself) such as Barney's, the space between art and how it is spoken about appeared as an opportunity for this project to be exhibited.



Vendor at the Milnerton Market, Cape Town (cellphone photo)

The vendor allows one to meander through her objects and is available for engagement.

#### 4.4 A triangle

The eventual progression of the above developments fed directly into a practical exploration of the event framework as a performance, exhibition or sharing space for the system. The following section explains three perspectives, termed the *presentation*, the *cinematic* and the *conversational* modes, that developed within and ultimately

shaped this exploration. As will be explained further in section 4.5, each of these modes rely on my presence as an interface to the system and the project at large.

The presentation mode explores the opportunity for images to enhance communication as a function of real-time access to them. In this respect the networked database is a tool that acts like a memory and like a voice; a memory in that elements can be recorded and recalled speedily and accurately, and a voice in that the combinations of elements allow me to speak *through* the media. The aim of the presentation is the exploration of articulating thought.



Brecht, George. 1968. *Chemistry of Music* (photograph of performance)

In contrast to the presentation mode, the cinematic mode explores the development of thoughts. Navigating the database as if navigating my own mind, I allow elements to collide and combine during free-associative tours, in search of what uncertain searching could yield. The emphasis of this inquiry is improvisation, striving to enhance the capacity to release into unencumbered action. The cinematic mode aims to both create and play a visual instrument and in doing construct a cinema of ideas.



Vertov, Dziga. 1929. *Man with a Movie Camera* (film still)

Lev Manovich (2002:xviii) wrote of *Man with a Movie Camera*, "Vertov is able to achieve something that new media designers and artists still have to learn – how to merge database and narrative into a new form". Years later, in the notes of a collaboration with Andreas Kratky called *Softcinema* that took up this challenge, Manovich (2002) writes, "...cinema replaced previous modes of visual narration with a sequential narrative and an assembly line of shots that appear on the screen one at a time. Given that the logic of the cinema machine was closely linked to the logic of the industrial age, what kind of cinema can we expect from the information age?"

The conversational mode is a hybrid of both the cinematic and the presentation modes, and attempts to both explore and augment the improvisational quality of conversation. Invested in the manner in which ideas are generated through exchange and interaction, the system is employed within this mode to prompt and record conversational journeys.

So, aside from the private journeying of my own thoughts for which the database is principally designed, an event, such as *Walkabout* situates me as an interface to the ongoing artwork through the application of these three modalities. During rule-bound

interactions, I present ideas pertaining to the work's construction, tour the digital network, and allow participants the opportunity to engage with me. I respond with the digital projection of elements from the database; images, videos, texts and audio clips, as well as with my own voice in conversation. By fielding questions related to the work's own making, I aim to make available an imagining of its form.



Beuys, Joseph. 1972. *Action Piece*

#### 4.5 I am Equipment

My overt presence in the *Walkabout* event – both physically and vocally – is a function of two principle issues. The first, as alluded to in earlier discussions, is that the same idiosyncratic tagging that facilitated the fluent navigation of the networked idea space, made it all but impossible for anyone other than myself to use it effectively. Exploiting subjective relations empowered the system,

but necessitated *my* control of it. The second, also alluded to earlier, is that the artwork is a process. Various imaginings of making the process available while it is still in motion (other than by inviting people into it) have inevitably felt inadequate. Thereby implicated in the work as a real-time component of it, I was encouraged to negotiate my specific role in the interaction.

In *Being and Time* Martin Heidegger (2000: 98) wrote on how objects can 'presence' or 'withdraw' from view as a function of their application in a given context. When a hammer, for example, is held in hand and thrust through the air en route to strike a nail, Heidegger suggests that it is equipment – withdrawn as an extension of the body. He terms this position 'ready-to-hand'. When the hammer is placed on the table it 'presences' as an object with physical properties of its own. It is 'present-at-hand'.



Abramović, Marina. 2010. *The Artist is Present* (Cellphone photo, MoMA)

In 2010, Marina Abramović performed *The Artist is Present* at MoMA in New York as part of a major retrospective of her work. The performance entailed Abramović sitting silently opposite an additional chair, offered to participants one at a time. The

participants were allowed to sit for as long as they desired. Abramović's meditative stare, regal dress and silence, rendered her sculptural and explicitly *present*. My ambition in *Walkabout* is alternately to withdraw. That is, to render myself equipment, facilitating contact between participants and the ephemeral, immaterial artwork. To withdraw in this sense is not to be invisible as such, but to be in use, in play.



Kentridge, William and The Handspring Puppet Company. 1992.

*Woyzeck in Johannesburg* (film still)

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# 5

## 5.1 Wittgenstein's Clicker

In an interview for the cassette 'magazine' *Audio Arts*, John Cage (1983) asks his interviewer: "How do you feel about Wittgenstein saying that beauty has no meaning and it just means that it clicks with us, that is to say, we approve of it". Cage further recounts Wittgenstein's suggestion that one simply keep a 'clicker' in one's pocket, mechanically *making* something beautiful by clicking. In a similar way to the framework of Cage's 4'33", Wittgenstein's clicker operates as a conceptual tool – augmenting experience of the world by facilitating or framing experience as an engagement or encounter. Counteracting the habit and familiarity characterized by the everyday, both of these tools are examples of *thought acts* (as described in section 2.1) an ideal toward which this project is ultimately aimed.

The system is a rung on the ladder toward that ideal. While it is still materially composed – in the form of digital media documents within a digital archive – its character is temporal, transient and generative as a result of its networked nature. It has therefore released me from a place of anxiety, primarily over the inanity of attempting to hoard lost, buried or stagnant thoughts, to a place where my thoughts are evolving, in conversation with each other, and where they can be journeyed through as one would the library of one's mind.

In other words, the system has encouraged action in the world by offering the knowledge that action (writing a note on my hand, making a block sculpture, or filming a progression of ants) will be enveloped by the database and remain both active and interactive – connecting with similar families of ideas and contributing to the value of the system at large.

The value is quite simply the effect of this constant validation, born from indefinite searching and an acceptance of uncertainty as a central and productive activity. The next step is to click delete.

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Studio, Michaelis School of Fine Art. (Photo by Jonx Pillemer)

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# 6

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# 7

## **Appendix**

A reverse chronology of selected activity

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## 7.1 Curating an event interaction (2011)

This conversation with Kathryn Smith explored the possibility of the external curatorship of an event interaction, given my role as an interface to, or component of the artwork.



Conversation with Kathryn Smith. Hosted by serialworks  
(photo by Jonx Pillemer)



Installation view. Hosted by serialworks (photo by Jonx Pillemer)

## 7.2 Conversation(s)two (2010)

A series of conversations performed in the Arena Theatre, Cape Town in December 2010. Six artists (Kyle Morland, Jared Ginsburg, Francis Burger, Christian Nerf, Lee Thomson and Lance Herman) were sequentially invited on stage to explore the role of conversation within their respective collaborative practices.



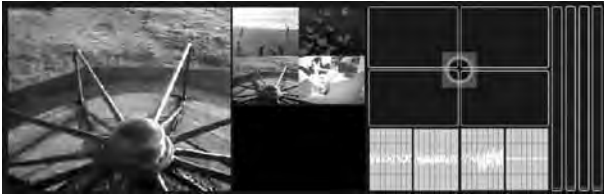
Setup for *Conversation(s)two* (photo by Jonx Pillemer)



*Conversation(s)two*  
(Pictured is Christian Nerf, photo by Jonx Pillemer)

### 7.3 Video Performer 3.1 (2010)

Custom software designed in Max/MSP Jitter to perform improvised cinematic tours.



*Video performer 3.1 (detail of interface, screenshot)*



*Video performer 3.1 (detail of program, screenshot)*



Michaelis studio after experiments with musician Shane Cooper  
(photo by Jonx Pillemer)

#### 7.4 Consultation Times (2010)

Conducted in collaboration with Christian Nerf, *Consultation Times* involved Nerf speaking while I attempted to picture my own thought in response to his words via digital imagery.



*Consultation Times*, Woodstock studio, Cape Town (cellphone photo)

#### 7.5 Conversation One (2010)

*Conversation One* invited ten artists to an introduction of the digital thought archive (outlined in this document) in an attempt to offer it as a strategy to experiment with in their own practice.



*Conversation One*. Hosted by serialworks  
(photo by Jonx Pillemer)

## 7.6 Protocol (2010)

*Protocol* was a conversation between a fan and a computer. When the fan was directed towards the computer, it 'listened' by playing a video of a quiet mouth. When the fan was at the extreme edges of its automated rotation (far left and far right), the computer 'thought' by randomly scrolling through a selection of 120 images collected in Picasa during the making of the installation.



*Protocol* (installation)

## 7.7 8 Seconds (2010)

*8 seconds* was an interactive computer/video piece that measured and displayed the duration of attention it received from viewers.



*8 Seconds 2010*. (screenshot)

## 7.8 Video Experiment One (2010)

*Video Experiment One* used custom-built software to select and play files autonomously from an archive. Hosted at the Intimate Theatre in Cape Town, February 2010, the archive was comprised of over 50 one-minute videos as a result of a public call for submissions.

*Video Experiment One* was project by Anonymous Feature – a collaboration between myself, Francis Burger and Robyn Nesbitt.



Anonymous Feature. 2010. *Video Experiment One*  
(photo by Jonx Pillemer)



*Video Experiment One's* algorithmic score, as it appeared in the call for submissions

## 7.9 AudioVisual Art Travel Kit (2009- )

The *AudioVisual Art/Travel Kit (AVATk)* is a set of tools that allows for the creation of art on the move.



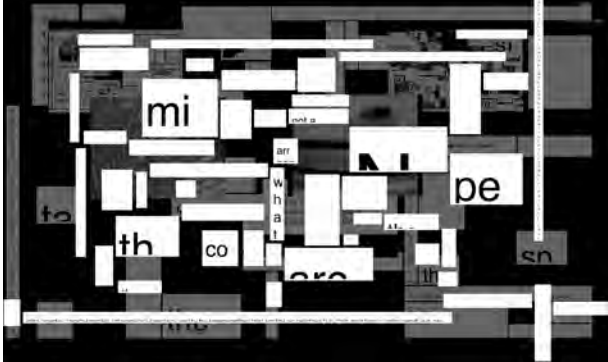
Fold up chair



Think of pictures as words (pocket projector, Dewaal Park)

## 7.10 Desktop Geometry (2009)

Early investigations addressed the digital computer desktop as a site of activity. Screenshots became a form of note taking, recording cross-sections of ongoing activity and thereby a means to reflect on the processes.



*Desktop Geometry (screenshot)*



*Home desk (cellphone photo)*

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“How long the ingredients of gunpowder existed before gunpowder did! ... If, when thinking, we yield too freely to the natural combinations of the forms of understanding and of reason, then our concepts often stick so much to others that they can't unite with those to which they really belong ...we must deliberately bring things into contact with each other. We must experiment with ideas.”  
(Lichtenberg in Nordmann 2005:26)

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