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Introduction

We are pleased to be able to say that over the next eight weeks we are going to publish a series of chapters jointly written by two of Scotland's most interesting artists working with environmental and ecological issues. In an interesting intersection both artists completed MA studies in environmental philosophy, on the *MA Value and Environment (MAVE)* at the University of Lancaster and the University of Central Lancashire respectively.

Samantha Clark and Judy Spark: two artists, both aware of the other's practice and the possible parallels. One e-mailed the other, by way of lessening the gap. It transpires that they both have an interest in nothing as well as things in common.

More tangibly perhaps, both artists have also made a commitment to writing; about 'things' and also 'no things' – those things in which the first clue to their existence may be their apparent absence. Using these shared concerns as a sort of lens, the two then set out to make an analysis of the terrain between writing and the physical artwork. A small group of researchers and staff at Gray's School of Art were invited, through a conversational presentation, to join them in exploring the between.

Samantha Clark is a practising artist and Reader in Art at The University of the West of Scotland. She has had written work published in *Environmental Values* and *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*. She is currently undertaking a PhD in Creative Writing at St Andrews University.
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Judy Spark is a practicing artist and lecturer in Contemporary Art Practice at Gray's School of Art. She has recently had work published in *PhaenEx* the electronic journal of the international *Society for Existential and Phenomenological Theory and Culture* (EPTC).
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<http://www.rgu.ac.uk/dmstaff/spark-judy>

Editorial Policy

These texts have been published on ecoartscotland and are collected here to make them more readily available since they represent a significant contribution to a wider understanding of the practices of arts and ecology. They have been produced as pdfs from the website and comments on pieces have been left for the reader's interest. The output of pdfs from the website is not an elegant process and some formatting becomes messy, but on the converse side all links are spelt out. The only change that has been made to the pdfs is to amend the pagination.

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The Content of Nothing :: Part 1 :: The Ether

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/ether-1.jpg>)

Judy Spark: "Aerial Coil" (B/W print Courtesy of BT Archives) and "Of Origins Unknown; the Galena Radio"

from Tuning to the Ether, Cupar Festival of Visual Art, 2009

Judy Spark: This work, consisting of a series of archive prints and a set of hand-made radios constructed from odds and ends such as copper wire, pencil leads and safety pins, was made for Cupar Visual Arts Festival in 2009. I had come across some references to a little known aspect of the town, which was that it played a part in the development of transatlantic telephony in the late 1920s. As a result of this work I later, in 2011, undertook a short residency in Cupar, the focus of which was to explore this matter in more depth. It transpires that the town and the area around it, sits in a sort of natural dip in the land that is said to be especially disposed towards the reception of LW radio signals. I was particularly interested in a letter that I came across in the BT Archive in London, written by a Mr Jacks of Cupar in 1928 to a Mr J. D. Taylor of the Institute of Electrical Engineers in receipt of a cheque he had been issued in exchange for allowing the positioning of telephone lines across his land. He states:

"I know nothing of wireless initiatives, but judging from the results we have from continental stations, I think our quiet, damp, elevated hollow must have special facilities for reception."

And there is some scientific grounding for this theory.

I have a long-standing interest in what may be present around us, but unseen, unperceived, or at least not fully. Radio communications, and their relation to natural phenomena are for me therefore, highly intriguing. I have recently made an exploration of this relationship through writing, in a paper entitled *The Enviroing Air*. The paper explores the intertwining of the natural and the technological through the case study of a particular communications installation in Assynt in the far north west of Scotland. A phenomenological description – phenomenology being the science of direct experience – of the installation is made in service of this aim but also by drawing on elements of physics, that are perhaps less easy to experience directly. This combined approach is considered as a legitimate

phenomenological 'method', one very well articulated by the philosopher Anthony Steinbock.

[Link to PDF, extract from *The Environing Air* \(https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-environing-air.pdf\)](https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-environing-air.pdf)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/ether-2.jpg>)

Samantha Clark: Photos taken by SC circa 1981 featuring the artist's father assembling a home-made 2m antenna above Loch Torridon

Samantha Clark: It's fascinating to discover the links between our practices, because the notion of 'The Subtle Ether' has been an interest in my own work for a long time; an ongoing preoccupation with gaps, absences, distance, longing, nothing, the hidden or invisible, and the notion of 'between-ness', the ether as something postulated to fill the gaps between everything, explaining how light travels. What is between things? What is 'no-thing'? Ask that question and another follows: What is a 'thing?'. And that's when everything starts to get very intriguing. The work is really a way to look at these questions from all angles, creatively, visually, philosophically, lyrically. I was drawn towards the explorations of these questions that emerge in continental philosophy, especially in the tradition of phenomenology, and the insights that approach gives into role of absence in perception. There seem to be parallels between phenomenology and aspects of Buddhist philosophy, in which 'things' are understood as not having 'own-being', that is not existing from their 'own side', but presenting themselves as confluences, more or less momentary, of millions upon millions of causes and conditions, including the observer. So the object becomes less of a static 'thing' and more like a standing wave, what is termed by Husserl a 'pole of identity' within this flow of percepts. This way of seeing brings everything alive; things and the stuff between things all start to get involved. It strikes me as an intrinsically ecological way of seeing.

So, I have come from a visual art practice into philosophy and 'academic' writing, and now am working on a PhD on Creative Writing, still unpacking this notion of 'the Subtle Ether', using this as a kind of metaphorical hook on which to hang a related set of ideas.

I had been preoccupied with these ideas for a long time but the personal relevance only really came home to me after my father died and I began to clear his things. He worked for 45 years as a telecoms engineer for the BBC, from wartime radio to the early days of television, retiring just at the point when digital technology was coming in. After he retired he carried on as an enthusiastic Radio HAM and maker of remote control models. I came across photographs (above) recently, which I think I took, on a family holiday to Torridon. We had hiked up the hill where my Dad assembled this yagi antenna to see what 2 metre radio signals might be propagating through that landscape. The two metre band is a portion of the VHF radio spectrum allocated for amateur use. Its signal is usually fairly local, a few miles or so, unless bounced onwards by a repeater station. But sometimes the signals can travel huge distances. Occasionally, signal bending caused by changes in the ionosphere caused by sunspots, meteors or auroras can allow 2 metre signals to carry hundreds or even thousands of miles. With enough power behind it, a signal can be bounced from the face of the moon. A person transmitting through the earth's atmosphere to the moon may hear the end of his own transmission returning, an echo crossing a wide canyon. To me, as a kid, this kind of expedition didn't feel any more technological than the fishing trips we also used to go on – picking a likely spot, keeping an eye on weather,

assembling the fishing rod or home-made antenna, waiting, watching, hopefully catching something that had been 'swimming' in ether/water. Of course, now we know that electromagnetic radiation from man-made sources is suspected of affecting bees, even some 'electrosensitive' humans. So it's not completely innocent either. Mind you, neither is fishing.

I find the 'ether' such an interesting nothing-thing because it really is 'between-ness' – it oscillates between natural and technological, between nothing and something, rational and irrational, science and poetry, distance and intimate connection, and it's also something to do with human relationships, in the silence and (mis)communication within families. It's a word that is a constant shapeshifter, reflecting our cultural preoccupations and scientific ideas right back at us. It gave birth to the science of electricity and magnetism, and yet also Spiritualism and Mesmerism. It gets debunked as one thing, 'the luminiferous ether', and keeps coming back as something else, dark energy perhaps, or the Higgs Field.



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-on-drumcarrow.jpg>)

Judy Spark on Drumcarrow Hill, Cupar testing the reception of her handmade radios.

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Heidegger, M. *Being and Time* Trans. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962) [1926]

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Steinbock, A.J. "Back to the Things Themselves: Introduction". *Human Studies* 20 (The Netherlands: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1997) pp.127–135.

Tags: [aesthetics](http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/aesthetics/) (<http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/aesthetics/>), [Content of Nothing](http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/content-of-nothing/) (<http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/content-of-nothing/>), [Environmental Philosophy](http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/environmental-philosophy/) (<http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/environmental-philosophy/>), [Judy Spark](http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/judy-spark/) (<http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/judy-spark/>), [Samantha Clark](http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/samantha-clark/) (<http://ecoartscotland.net/tag/samantha-clark/>)

This entry was posted on July 30, 2014 at 8:30 am and is filed under [Artists](#), [Content of Nothing](#), [Eco-Criticism](#), [Guest Blog](#), [Knowledge](#), [Research](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site. .

One Response to “The Content of Nothing :: Part 1 :: The Ether”

The Content of Nothing :: Part 1 :: The Ether | The CSPA Says:

August 1, 2014 at 2:19 pm | Reply edit

[...] This post comes to you from EcoArtScotland [...]

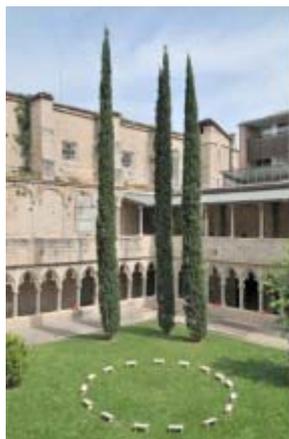
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The Content of Nothing :: Part 2 :: Purposeful non-doing

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/purposeful-1.jpg>)

Samantha Clark: 'A Year of Breathing'

Project for Natural Balance: Equilibrio Natural, Girona, Spain, May 2009

Samantha Clark: In 2009 was asked to make a proposal for an eco-art exhibition called *Equilibrio Natural: Natural Balance* that was taking place in Girona, Spain, which was to be a series of installations around the city developed by artists from all over the world. When I looked at the criteria, I noticed that I had to assure the organisers I would use local materials. And yet the curators and all the artists were going to be flying in from all over Europe and North America just for the exhibition. I felt there was a conflict at the heart of this, and so my proposal pointed out that I wasn't a local material, and also quite a heavy lump to transport. So I proposed to stay at home, and to donate the CO2 emissions of my return flight to the people of Girona, for the purposes of guilt-free exhalation. I worked out that it would be about the equivalent of one-year's worth of exhalation (according to some online carbon offsetting calculators it could be as much as 6 years, depending on how many trees they want to sell you). So I worked remotely with locally-based helpers, yoga teachers and Buddhist centres to run a series of meditations on the breath and mindful exhalation, in a space that used to be a mediaeval cloister. It was really interesting to discover that participants felt it offered them a way to physically encounter with the body something invisible that is usually discussed in very abstract, vast terms of 'parts per million', which makes it seem like something far away. They said that meditating on the breath like this, brought them to understand in a direct, felt way that 'the atmosphere', which is usually seen as something 'up there' is also the very air that passes through our bodies. We are in direct relation with it..



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/purposeful-2.jpg>)

Samantha Clark: S.T.I.L.L. : A project for Gentle Actions: Art Ecology Actions
Kunstnerhus, Oslo, Norway
Oct/Nov 2010

Following this I was asked to propose another project for an exhibition in 2010 called *Gentle Actions: Art Ecology Action* in Oslo. I was still troubled what seems like a cognitive dissonance where we artists, like anyone else, can have a blind spot regarding the ecological footprint of our travel because we want to have an international profile. There's such a pressure on us to do this as artists and as academics. I don't want to condemn it outright, and I know I am complicit, but I do feel the need to recognise this as a conflict, and to draw it out into the open rather than just accept it as a necessary evil or just ignore it. If the means and the stated ends are in direct conflict, then the integrity of the work is compromised. I had been teamed up, by the curators, with a Swiss artist who lives in the States, but I felt rather conflicted about her project to fly to Norway to make a piece of work, called *S.P.I.L.L.* about the Gulf oil spill. I wasn't sure how to respond to or work with her proposal, which seemed to involve using a lot of fossil fuels to make a statement about our dependence on fossil fuels.

David Peat in the book (which gave this exhibition its title) *Gentle Actions* (2008) proposes that acting less, hesitating more, and perhaps refraining from acting at all, might at times be an appropriate response to the crisis of climate change. After all, it's our incessant rushing about that sucks up so much fossil fuel, and that taking time and space to reflect is important too. It occurred to me that just as a physical 'nothing' keeps turning out to be replete with meaning and unfathomably complex, an active 'doing nothing' might be, in this case, the most appropriate choice of action. So my response to *S.P.I.L.L.* was a contribution I called *S.T.I.L.L.* I chose to participate remotely, staying at home in Scotland to practice the gentle art of keeping still. I wrote, recorded and uploaded a series of reflection on stillness, pausing, air, and the breath as a direct, felt interaction with the invisible environment. The air, that we barely register and can't see, yet depend on utterly, is a completely astonishing ongoing product of the biosphere.

PDF of Thin Air excerpt (<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/sc-thin-air.pdf>)

Judy Spark: I love the way that that this sits at the 'in between' of the scientific and the poetic – which tend to get forced apart. We have scientific evidence of these processes but we can also have directly observed experience of many of them if enough attention is paid. I mentioned before that this method of drawing on the scientific is a perfectly permissible phenomenological starting point, something that can get forgotten as we are so used to viewing things in dualistic terms. I'm particularly interested here in the premise that you undertook a process of 'non-doing', apart from the recorded speech, in order to get something to happen and that the *Year of Breathing* piece rested on this premise too. It's purposeful non-doing!



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-straightrods.jpg>)

Judy Spark: "The Straight Rods" from Discovering Dowsing
Ardo House, Aberdeenshire, (NEOS 2010)

JS: This work came about in 2010 at Ardo House in Aberdeenshire as part of North East Open Studios (NEOS). I was still working with the notion of tuning here, being tuned in or employing ones natural sensitivities in some way, a process so evident in the work you have been talking about above. Dowsing is said to depend upon the sensitivity of the dowser to movement in the rods as they pick up subtle changes in ground energy as a result of the presence of water.

A series of handmade dowsing rods were installed in the naturally enclosed space beneath a mature Beech tree in the grounds of the house. Visitors were invited to test some of the rods as they walked around and then asked to note the results on an evolving 'drawing', installed in the laundry room, the basis of which was a hand drawn map of the grounds. As I was developing the work, I had a conversation with one of the residents of the house, who had lived there since the 1980s. She told me that when they first moved in, the house had required to be hooked up to the mains water supply and a 'handy man' had arrived from the local council to locate the path of an old water pipe network known to be already present somewhere at that location. To accomplish this task, he came equipped with a pair of willow dowsing rods, with which he successfully pinpointed the spot for the new pipes to be sunk. The important thing about this piece of work was the involvement of visitors in terms of thinking about their own potential to pick up on subtle energy changes. It is widely held, in the dowsing literature, that one is able to dowse only if one first believes one can!

You have remarked that this work was like a sort of application of Goethe's 'delicate empiricism'; I like this parallel. We may scoff at the notion of practices such as dowsing but discoveries and links that have previously been discounted or thought unbelievable may yet bear fruit and indeed, as your reading above shows, even a subtle shift in the way that we attend to things can transform our experience of them. The drawing together of the scientific with phenomenological (or poetic, or 'lyrical') accounts of things, towards a fuller experience of the world, need not make for the poor fit it may at first seem. The Mind and Life Institute for instance exists to bring together Buddhist practices and Western science towards a better understanding of the human mind. Perhaps everything in our world requires this trusting openness and unity of approach. It's as if we need to shift from the position of taking things apart in order to understand their individual components to one that appreciates the complexity, movement and interlinking of all the bits – like the ecological view. This matters because we are not just observers – as we are open to the world around us it in turn gives us who we are.

References:

F. David Peat (2008) *Gentle Actions: Bringing Creative Change to a Turbulent World*, Pari Publishing

The Mind and Life Institute – <http://www.mindandlife.org/> (<http://www.mindandlife.org/>)

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2 Responses to “The Content of Nothing :: Part 2 :: Purposeful non-doing”

Em Strang Says:

[August 10, 2014 at 12:01 pm](#) | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

Great to flag up the travel/international profile thing, Sam. Good to be more aware of this and to try to work out ways of contributing ‘remotely’. I really enjoyed reading this, thanks.

The Content of Nothing :: Part 2 :: Purposeful non-doing | The CSPA Says:

[August 14, 2014 at 2:19 pm](#) | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

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The Content of Nothing :: Part 3 :: On Gaps

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/sc-gravity-boots.jpg>)

Samantha Clark: 'Instruments for Observing the Universe *3 : Gravity Boots'
Allenheads Contemporary Arts, Northumberland August 2013

Samantha Clark: According to astronomers we can only actually perceive about 4.7% of the universe. This is the 'shiny stuff,' the atoms and particles that we can actually see, the 'things' bit. The rest of it, the 'nothing' bit, is made up of 'dark matter', which is about 27%, and 'dark energy' which makes up about 68%. These percentages are not absolutes, not slices of a finite pie, but expressions of relationship, a ratio between the visible and the invisible. They speak eloquently of the relationship between the material and the ineffable. According to modern physics, the material world is only this 4.7%, a tiny fraction, our only point of contact, the tip of an iceberg, a keyhole to peep through. Behind it lies a vast hinterland of strange, dimly seen, uncanny something-nothingness, which is only seen through the effects it has on see-able matter; through its gravitational effects, in the case of dark matter, and in the accelerating expansion of the universe, possibly caused by dark energy. I took part in a short residency this August at Allenheads Contemporary Arts in Northumberland, and together with a group of a dozen or so other artists we explored this notion of the 95% of the universe which we can't perceive, and had fascinating conversations with an astroparticle physicist who had also been invited. Particle physicists use non-detection as a means of detection – they look for the gap, the hole, the nothing, and voilà! An invisible particle! It turns out that mass, the very solidity and weight of the material world, is not a property of matter itself but a result of the interaction between matter and Higgs particles. We swim through the Higgs field like fish through the sea (and it through us) and its pull we experience as gravity, a phenomenon that remains a great scientific mystery. For the purposes of this one-week residency I quickly made a series of 'sketches' in response to the ideas we explored together – 'Instruments for Exploring the Universe' – including these 'gravity boots' and accompanying piece of text::

'Walking up a hill is a good time to remember that gravity is a mystery to science, though knowing this

doesn't help the climb much. How strange it is that this firm press of my two feet upon the ground should be felt so keenly by the body, yet seen so dimly by the mind. They say that cold dark matter, the unseen stuff that makes up most of the universe, trawls through us all the time. Like all of the visible world I am fat with the unseen fullness of empty space. Dark matter, slow, lead-heavy, its dull pull clumps galaxies together like dust seeding rainclouds. Puffing uphill I am clogged with it. I feel my own weight as it leans into me. Yet this whole shining world would drift away without its dark ballast.'

Judy Spark: Gravity, a fundamental element of our own make up, yet we generally talk of it as something separate from us that 'happens' when we drop something. I really like the way that what you've said here emphasises the relationship we have with this 'ineffable substance'. This notion of 'relationship' is so vital to a fuller appreciation of the things and processes, both natural and technological, that are present or taking place around us. I note that alongside the boots was another *Instrument for Observing the Universe* in the form of an old valve radio tuned to what's between stations.....



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/gaps-1.jpg>)

"Listening in the Gap" from *Back to the Things Themselves*; Judy Spark, The Briggait, Glasgow Festival of Visual Art 2012 (with Lesley Punton)

This printed and bound text, was exhibited in a two person show *Back to the Things Themselves* with Lesley Punton in the Briggait in Glasgow as part of Glasgow International Festival of Visual Art 2012. The work consisted of a series of written descriptions detailing what could be heard during a concentrated period of listening in the gaps between broadcasts over the FM spectrum of a Robert's R25 analogue radio (88 – 108 FM) on the 25th May 2011 between 4.20 and 6.15pm.

The notion that the 'spaces' between broadcasts themselves hold 'content' is of great interest to me. It seems to say a lot about the presence of what appears, on the surface of things, to be absent, and I'm drawn to the parallels between this and the experience of what is between thoughts, i.e., nothing, the Buddhist conception of 'pure consciousness'? Again it seems to pertain to the idea of a 'gap', a stillness, that quells the chatter about what and how things are, leaving a space for things to be more fully disclosed in different ways. Phenomenology has it that consciousness is always consciousness of something.

It may be something cynical in the quality of my observation but it seems that in our culture, we generally find that we must name what occurs in a gap, rather than simply experiencing the quality of this space itself. An extract from the text pictured above reads,

"102 – 104

Soft hiss, like rain in trees, but at a distance. The spinning high-pitched sound is there but less keen. The odd crackle, like dust on a record, can be heard. These sounds play around the edges of deliberately broadcast ones."

A parallel work *Instructions for Creating a Gap*, shown in the adjacent room, consisted of a pile of A4 folded sheets of printed instructions. Visitors were encouraged to take a copy away with them that they might try 'listening in gaps' themselves at home. Over the course of the exhibition, around 1000 of

these texts left the gallery; however I have no information as to whether the exercise was undertaken by anyone who holds a copy.



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/gaps-2.jpg>)

“The Things Themselves” and “Morning Broadcast” from Back to the Things Themselves GFVA 2012

Still with the notion of radio and ‘gaps’, both these pieces of work used mini FM radio transmitters to transmit sound through radios. In *Morning Broadcast*, the cynic takes those ‘universe observing tools’ and plugs gaps through which it might be listened to with her own sounds.....in this case, birdsong.

(The sound of birdsong in the room in which this discussion was taking place became apparent at the appearance of this slide.)

This ‘confounding’ of the ‘natural’ with the technological is designed to address the ways in which we attend to things. Because of the acoustics of the Briggait it sometimes seemed to gallery visitors as if the sound were coming from outside the building. *The Things Themselves* consisted of two radios broadcasting a series of softly spoken descriptions, in both male and female voices. The descriptions articulate the natural forms that are the subject of the drawings *A Sort of Visual Rhythm* (*Symphoricarpos*) also situated in gallery 1 and *Orrery* (*Galium aparine*) in gallery 2. The soundtracks coming from the two radios were slightly out of sync with one another, so that two different voices could be heard at any one time. I think that my interest in this latter radio work, lay in the fact that neither in the reported descriptions, nor in the drawings of the things themselves, could even an approximation of the content of the original experience, that of encountering the forms in the landscape, be made. The real ‘listening’ could only really have taken place within that original experience.

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This entry was posted on August 13, 2014 at 8:30 am and is filed under [Artists](#), [Content of Nothing](#), [Eco-Criticism](#), [Guest Blog](#), [Knowledge](#), [Research](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#) feed. You can [leave a response](#), or [trackback](#) from your own site. .

One Response to “The Content of Nothing :: Part 3 :: On Gaps”

The Content of Nothing :: Part 3 :: On Gaps | The CSPA Says:

August 21, 2014 at 8:40 am | Reply edit

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The Content of Nothing :: Part 4 :: On Attending

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-a-sort-of-visual-rhythm.jpg>)

“A Sort of Visual Rhythm: Symphoricarpos” from Back to the Things Themselves GFVA 2012

Samantha Clark: I was really interested in how you see the role of drawing within your practice. It seems to me that the process of drawing, particularly such obviously meticulous and detailed drawing that has evidently taken some time, is a kind of attention, a meditative or contemplative process. And I think so much of creative work, whether visual or writing, is fundamentally about this paying attention, and then through putting the work out, drawing other peoples’ attention, a kind of ‘pointing out’, saying ‘have you ever noticed this?’ To ‘attend’ means to wait, to be present with, to serve, to listen, to wait, to take care of someone/something. Its Latin root ‘ad-tendere’ means ‘to stretch into’, to stretch one’s mind towards something.

I wanted to quote from the Canadian poet Tim Lilburn’s essay *How to be here?* because he puts something very eloquently that I couldn’t say any better. Lilburn was trained as a Jesuit, now teaches philosophy in a catholic college, and his work is imbued with a very scholarly understanding of the tradition of ‘negative theology’ and the mystical, contemplative tradition of Christianity that has been somewhat lost. He writes really beautifully about the practice of contemplation, and that desire to be ‘one with nature’ that is bandied around so much in environmental thinking, especially some of the less careful interpretations of deep ecology. It’s something I am always uneasy with. We can never be ‘at one with nature’ in any straightforward, cosy way. Nature doesn’t give a s**t.

[PDF extract, Lilburn on watching some deer come into his yard\(https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/sc-lilburn.pdf\)](https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/sc-lilburn.pdf)

Lilburn is eloquent on this being-in-the-world and yet there being a separation, a gap, an otherness.

Merleau-Ponty is also helpful on this when he talks about the 'flesh', that there is a kind of blind spot, a gap in our experience of the world just at the point where we are folded into it – a 'chiasm'. He goes back again and again to the experience of the toucher touched, when you touch one hand with the other – you can experience 'touching' or 'being touched' but not exactly simultaneously. I think he was wary of the 'merging' that can be implied when we start to see self and world as 'the same'. In his work on the flesh he describes an 'embrace', not a merging. The fleshy solidity of things in the world is not an obstacle but a means of communication. There is differentiation, a gap. But this is not the same as dualism. (Merleau-Ponty, 1968: 130-155) Sartre was big on this too: 'Nothingness haunts being'. He argued that when we become 'self' conscious, there is a slight displacement of the ego that allows us to become reflexive, and so there is a gap, a nothingness, right at the heart of the self. (Sartre, 1937/2000) He was predictably bleak and gloomy about it, describing it as a 'worm' at the heart of being, but I think of it in a similar way to the 'gap' between two eyelines in stereo vision (or sound) that punches a third dimension into experience, or like to space in a bell that allows it to resonate.

Judy Spark: I had never heard of Lilburn until you introduced me to him but I am really struck firstly by how beautifully he puts this feeling of wanting to 'know' the world, but not really being able to; he sees his 'separation' from it as part of the experience; a "desire whose satisfaction is its frustration and continuance" and his thinking does seem comparable to Merleau-Ponty's on the concept 'flesh'. These notions speak to me especially in light of what I was alluding to earlier about the impossibility of bridging this separation through description or the sort of attention that is part of drawing, and I'm not saying that bridging the separation ought to be the aim. What we seem to be saying is that this gap itself is very important, and indeed may itself prove to be fertile ground in ways that we (humans) do not yet fully appreciate or understand.

This practice of drawing is indeed a method of paying attention, it is contemplative and the idea of 'stretching ones mind towards something' is exactly how it feels. However, these drawings don't come about through any romantic method of sitting in a field meditating over something and its rendering. As much as this activity may exist as a personal counter to an overload of daily information transmission, through which little of value may actually be received, their making employs the tools of this culture: the digital camera, the print shop, the photocopier. The subjects of the drawings are ones that have 'spoken' to me, usually accumulatively, over a period of time on walks made regularly as I go about daily activities (getting to work for instance) on routes that are often a mix of the urban and the rural, the peripheries of the cities I inhabit. I would no more sit down in these environments (or any other outdoor locations) and start drawing than fly in the air. I am too much a product of the 21st Century for that, I'm too afraid I'd attract unwanted attention (human or animal), I'm too soft – get too hot or too cold easily, get hungry, need to pee, or suffer from some other discomfort. As long as I keep moving, I'm fine. But the things still 'speak' and I try to build sense from these broken transmissions. Back in my climate controlled studio, I grid up the enlarged photograph of the 'thing' that I'm working from. I refer to the notes on it made after each encounter. I think my way back through this encounter as it is transferred to paper, appears as marks in graphite and ends up as not of one world (mine) or another (the one the thing itself inhabits) but something in between. In this process of working in the gap between the two, I find the space to 'stretch my mind toward' the thing encountered, the world it inhabits, and this 'exchange' is picked up again, the next time I'm on that particular path.

I'm aware that there is again something of the cynic present here in this account of observing the 'natural', in a way that still 'confounds' it with the technological, in the methods employed in bringing about the work, and in the overlaying of the sound-work that relates to it. Sometimes during the process of these drawings, I think about an experiment I came across in a book called *The Secret Life of Plants*, the aim of which was to clear a field of pests using electromagnetic resonance to treat, not the field itself, but a photograph of it! It was claimed that the molecular make up of the photographic emulsion would resonate at the same frequencies as the objects in the photograph. If this is just slightly unbelievable (it maybe doesn't work with digital!), it nevertheless does make me think about what exactly is taken, made, stilled or distilled in the making of a photograph. There is some sort of exchange, and energy has to be part of this, between the seer and the seen. Both are slightly changed by the encounter, folded into one another but

still distinct, to turn to Merleau Ponty again. Drawing these things, even through these clunky methods, is a way to begin to get to this.

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One Response to “The Content of Nothing :: Part 4 :: On Attending”

[The Content of Nothing :: Part 4 :: On Attending | The CSPA Says:](#)

[August 21, 2014 at 10:56 am | Reply](#) [edit](#)

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Content of Nothing :: Part 5 :: On Wonder

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/07/js-olafureliasson.jpg>)

Olafur Eliasson: Your Natural Denudation Inverted Carnegie International 1999 Pittsburgh. Image reproduced from Olafur Eliasson, Phaidon Books (2002)

Judy Spark: Olafur Eliasson's work seems built around this notion of a 'gap' as we catch ourselves in the shift between responding to what it seems we are faced with and our recognition of this response. Although I have only ever seen it in books, I love this piece; it resembles some sort of natural geyser – it reminds me of an exquisite Hokusai landscape but it's constructed around the flue outlet of the Museum's heating system. You'd said that the 'spectacle' of his work had sometimes made you uncomfortable, and indeed, I appreciate what you mean by this, but I've been persisting recently with trying to unearth a bit more about what he does. The work plays on our tendency to 'name' things as we momentarily encounter the thing we are viewing as 'real'. For me, it's as if this thing of the spectacle; the technological sublimity he creates, ends up coming back on itself to 'the things themselves'; as we remember that what we are seeing is an artwork, a 'construction' and not a 'real' thing, we are made to reflect on why we were not at first moved by the original – had forgotten how to see it. His work does seem to effect a shift in perception of our natural surroundings. Perhaps his intentions may turn out to be a little less 'worthy' than that but we are being invited to make what we make of it (every title has 'Your' at the beginning) or at least encouraged to recognise that this is what we are doing. It almost hurts that we might, for instance, have lain basking in wonder in Tate Modern (beneath the Weather Project) when we have forgotten how to be fully aware of the full implications of the sun itself! Eliasson's relationship to phenomenology is well evidenced, specifically in the work of writer Daniel Birnbaum. As I see it, Eliasson's work creates a 'gap', a space for wonder. I think a lot about this potential of the artwork as a space for wonder.

Samantha Clark: Yes, wonder as a momentary suspension of discursive thought, a pause or space we can enter. Wonder comes in for criticism, seen as a privilege of the leisured classes wandering awestruck around the mountains while local people are just busy getting on with their work, or as some kind of brainless, slack-jawed paralysis. It's been used that way historically, by the Church for example, to suppress curious and possibly heretical questioning. But I'm interested in some of the ethical arguments for wonder and enchantment presented by the likes of Suzi Gablik and Jane Bennett, Ronald Hepburn too. What a poem, or an artwork, or a piece of music can convey, is that sense of suspension, sharing a moment of wonder that comes like an unexpected gift, a moment with a particular weight to it, that leaves us in a slightly different shape. Bennett argues that this enchantment brings a gratitude and generosity to our ethical relations, that isn't about obligation or duty, but about love. Art works can open that space up for us. And I think that ideas can do that too. So I don't draw a line between academic and creative work in that regard.

Bennett argues that 'wonder is not a naive escape from politics but marks the vitality and agency of a world that sometimes bestows the gift of joy to humans, a gift that can be translated into ethical generosity' (2001: 175). It's not about going about in a constant dwam, but about those moments of wonder that punctuate the everyday. She equates wonder with love for the world, a love that engenders care. Like Hepburn, she thinks we should cultivate the capacity for wonder, and embrace those moments of enchantment which act as a 'shot in the arm, a fleeting return to childlike excitement about life' (5). Bennett suggests that the delight and joy of wonder spills its good humour over into our ethical life, to nourish an ethics based on love for the world rather than on duty and obligation, 'rendering its judgments more generous and its claims less dogmatic' (10). Hepburn sees an affinity between the non-exploitative, non-utilitarian attitude of wonder and 'attitudes that seek to affirm and respect other-being' (1984: 145). Wonder keeps our attention in and on things in the world, poignantly realising their potentiality and fragility. The attitude of wonder is one which, Hepburn thinks, readily gives rise to compassion. 'From a wondering recognition of forms of value proper to other beings,' he suggests, 'and a refusal to see them simply in terms of one's own utility-purposes, there is only a short step to humility.' (1984: 146)

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2 Responses to “Content of Nothing :: Part 5 :: On Wonder”

Content of Nothing :: Part 5 :: On Wonder | The CSPA Says:

August 28, 2014 at 12:12 pm | Reply edit

[...] This post comes to you from EcoArtScotland [...]

Eco art Scotland | Painting 3 Contextual Studies Says:

June 8, 2015 at 1:47 pm | Reply edit

[...] <http://ecoartscotland.net/2014/08/27/content-of-nothing-part-5-on-wonder/> [...]

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Content of Nothing :: Part 6 :: On Hope

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/js-untitled_2010.jpg)

Judy Spark: *Untitled*, digital print (500 x 309mm approximately) 2010

[In the previous post, Samantha Clark had been talking about the ethical import of wonder in the work of Ronald Hepburn, Suzi Gablick and Jane Bennett.]

Judy Spark: I want to believe in this link between wonder and ‘ethical generosity’ and even love and that there may only be a ‘short step’ from here to ‘humility’ but I feel compelled to take up the cynic’s position again. I’m not convinced. It’s not that I think that this is not possible exactly, but rather that it will be a long road. The human capacity for wonder is one that is shared by the artist, philosopher and scientist alike, indeed all of us have this latent disposition whether or not it is ever developed. But if it was going to lead naturally to an ethical relationship to the wider world, then I think that it would have done so by now. Sometimes it has pre-empted great scientific discovery, but equally, it can lead us to dismantle and separate things in an effort to learn how they work. It does not necessarily, for instance, always lead to an appreciation of the interconnected dependency of things. I feel inspired by Hepburn and Gablick, though I’m not so familiar with Bennett, but I don’t think that they back up their claims with anything concrete, how could they? How exactly does one move from a position of wonder to one of love and ethical awareness? But if this progression is at the moment unclear, perhaps this is ok. I think that the reason I make art and write is in order to encourage this tuning to wonder and the hopes for its potential, that maybe at some point, the pathway between these things will become clearer.

Samantha Clark: Yes, I think you are right to be cynical. Wonder linked to ignorance is a dangerous combination. People flock to see the orcas performing at Seaworld, and experience genuine wonder at the power and beauty of these creatures and their willingness to engage with humans, but they are ignorant of the suffering that this captivity causes the very creatures they admire so much. People wonder at the bare landscape of the Highlands with no idea that they are looking at an ecological disaster area, a man-made wet desert. A little bit of 'dismantling to see how it works' doesn't need to dispel wonder, but can actually create a more educated awareness. Wonder doesn't depend on a state of naivety. Kant, in his Critique of Judgement, noticed a difference between astonishment (*Verwunderung*) which fades once the novelty wears off, and a steady, contemplative wonderment (*Bewunderung*) which does not depend on novelty, and may even grow deeper with familiarity and understanding. The contemplative wonderment he described maintains the questioning and questing aspect of wonder, and yet rests attentively in the wonderful object (Kant, 1997: 273).

A recent document put together by the organisation Common Cause seems to propose some means by which this transition from 'wonder' to ethical and environmental awareness might be made. Their focus is on addressing the values we hold in order to create a shift to a more socially and environmentally just society, suggesting that the arts' 'capacity to trigger reflection, generate empathy, create dialogue and foster new ideas and relationships offers a powerful and democratic way of expressing, sharing and shaping values.' (Common Cause, 2013: 4). In the core paper of this document, the psychologist Tim Kasser suggests that our values can be described as either broadly extrinsic, such as financial success, image, popularity (which depend on rewards or other's opinions and promote competitive and selfish behaviour), or intrinsic, such as self-acceptance, community, affiliation (which promote more empathic and co-operative ways of behaving). He argues that we all have all of these values in us, but that they increase in importance to us the more they are stimulated, and that, broadly speaking, consumer societies emphasise and so promote the development of extrinsic values. These are shown to make us more dependent on external sources of happiness, such as status, entertainment and consumerism. This has far reaching effects. 'People who prioritise extrinsic values have been shown to care less about the environment and other species, whereas a focus on intrinsic values promotes more ecologically sustainable attitudes and behaviours' (11). Kasser builds an argument that pursuit of the arts (either as active participant or viewer) is important as it may deepen public commitment to values that promote environmental and social concern. I think there is some truth to this, though with certain caveats. Engaging with art as a high-end luxury commodity and status symbol clearly stimulates extrinsic values. So we need to be circumspect about what kind of art, and what kind of engagement we are talking about. But it seems pretty clear that it is emotions, not factual arguments, that shape our decisions, and that art can have some role to play here.

Ellie Harrison hits the nail on the head in her contribution to the same publication – arguing that to emphasise 'art' and 'culture' per se gives them a falsely elevated status and is misleading. 'What we all need regardless of our occupation, is not arts and culture per se, but simply time and space beyond the realms of the market, where we can each access knowledge, critically reflect and feel empowered to change our lives for the better' (21). She's right, but art can be one way of opening up some space and time. I think that wonder, when it crops up in the mundane, maybe hearing migrating geese honking as they go flying over the supermarket car park, momentarily opens up a space of this kind. Engaging with art or writing which invites us to share that experience with the writer or the artist 'primes' us to be receptive to it when it crops up in life. I think it helps us to open up a little crack in the midst of the day, a 'space between,' a momentary breather from the demands of making our way in a market economy devoted to heedless economic growth. Anything that makes us stop and remember to be grateful, even in a small way, makes a contribution. Gratitude is very subversive in a consumer culture that primes us to be in a constant state of wanting. Kasser again: 'One set of studies showed that very brief and very subtle reminders of the extrinsic value of money lead people to behave less helpfully and generously moments later' (9). And another study, 'that focused particularly on people for whom material possessions and social status were quite important found that thinking for a few minutes

about the intrinsic values of affiliation and being broadminded caused these individuals to express stronger care for the environment' 10). So inviting others to share a moment of wonder or reflection or gratitude through the art we make is maybe part of this drip feed, just tickling those extrinsic values one more time.

You mentioned hope, and hopefulness is a real issue these days, its something I seem to come up against again and again – in the context of 'eco-art' especially. Reading Rebecca Solnit's 'Hope in the Dark' helped me to think about this – that 'results' or 'outcomes' of creative work are nonlinear and unpredictable, so hanging on to some idea of what you'd like to happen as a result of your creative work is pointless. If you want direct results then direct action is a better bet. As artists we're working at the level of metaphor, getting in 'under the bonnet' of thought as it were – shift the metaphors and you contribute towards shifting thought. But it's not something didactic, or fact-based. It's more like lending your own small weight to the other side of the scales, towards tipping things back, rebalancing, in a Taoist kind of way. And if Kasser is right, and even such a subtle cue can unconsciously affect someone's values and behaviour, then perhaps that's cause for hope.

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5 Responses to “Content of Nothing :: Part 6 :: On Hope”

Mandy Haggith (@cybercrofter) Says:

September 3, 2014 at 10:50 am | Reply [edit](#)

I've really enjoyed reading these posts on 'nothing' (and of course all the best things are not things!). I was particularly pleased that you arrived at wonder, and then looked at whether this can take us to hope. I have a daily practice, which comes and goes, as such practices do, of what I call 'Earth Wondering'. This is basically trying to stop long enough in nature to discover something wonderful. Sometimes it's enough just to see/hear/sense it, and get back in touch with that sense of wonder. Often, it leads to wondering, in the questioning sense: how does that rowan tree survive on top of that boulder? why is the heron not afraid of the otter? how can I live more like a tree? In both senses, wonder is about waking up to being here, one of earth's participants.

When I'm not writing, I work as an environmental activist and one of the risks of this job is burning out and drowning in the doom and gloom of the destruction and injustice being perpetrated by our species. Wonder is the only cure I know.

I've come to the conclusion that I disagree that direct action is a better way of getting 'direct results' than art. I still think it's necessary, but most direct action is just a dance with powerful corporations and institutions that at best distracts them temporarily. It is the nibble of a zooplankton on the skin of a supertanker. If enough of us nibble at once, it may make the captain aware that we're angry, but if we actually want to turn the tankers, we need maps of where we want them to go. Art is, I think, crucial for the creation of those maps, and that art must be fed by wonder, and wondering.

Art, by communicating wonder, makes our animal response to the earth a social reality, and the discovery of shared wonder is the source, for me, of hope.

chrisfremantle Says:

September 4, 2014 at 12:48 pm | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

Thanks for this really thoughtful comment. I'll highlight it to the authors

spark11 Says:

September 9, 2014 at 1:15 pm | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

Hi Mandy,

Thanks so much for your thoughts. I really identify with what you say about 'Earth wondering'....and like the term. I think that, for me, this is something that takes place almost involuntarily as I go about my day, but the key is, as you say, to stop and notice what is happening, to register it in the mind, independent of all the other things that will be going on that day. As Sam and I noted in the discussion I think, wonder does seem to be highly undervalued, perhaps because of its associations with the sort of awe that leaves us incapacitated in some way, or at least is perceived to.

It's really interesting what you have to say from your perspective as a writer and activist – this is something I think about a lot: often asking myself in fact, what good does writing / books / art making do??...and wouldn't I be better to get out there and participate in direct action? It's not that I wouldn't do this, but I do like your analogy of the supertanker.....we all have to decide how to direct our energies. Those 'maps' that you speak of seem to me to have something to do with changing a culture, over the longer term perhaps. And if wonder is linked in some way to ethical behaviour, or hope, then a culture that has time for wonder would surely be a richer one?

Anyway thanks again!

Judy

Oh – and also wondered if you had seen this?

<http://northlightarts.org.uk/2014/08/fertile-ground/>

Content of Nothing :: Part 6 :: On Hope | The CSPA Says:

September 11, 2014 at 5:00 pm | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

[...] This post comes to you from EcoArtScotland [...]

Content of Nothing :: Part 6 :: On Hope | The CSPA | Sustainability Says:

September 11, 2014 at 5:08 pm | [Reply](#) [edit](#)

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Content of Nothing :: Part 7 :: Making and Writing

By [Chrisfremantle](#)

Judy Spark: We have talked about ‘hope’ and about ‘wonder’ but looking around at those mechanisms that will seek to commodify almost every realm of human endeavour the second it appears, it’s easy to feel a bit dispirited sometimes, despite the legions of creative practitioners who are standing up to this – or that play along with it in order to! Is for instance, the creeping ‘academisation’ of creative practice something that we should worry about in this respect? This development is surely bound up with the commodification of ‘knowledge’ and in a way that is closely aligned with what Tim Kasser (mentioned in the last post) would call ‘extrinsic’ values? In any case, for me, writing happens differently to making – though listening is still a major component – but I’ll need to think about what makes them different.

Samantha Clark: For me, it’s important to keep a lightness to creative work, not to let it become too sure of its own rightness, or too didactic. It needs to be a little uncertain, always in a questioning stance. But, like you, I’m also drawn to the academic, philosophical work. For me, the two are in direct conversation, I don’t draw a line, though as I’ve said, I like that I can load the academic work with all the baggage so the art can have more lightness. But it’s not done in the hope that I might make better art as a result of all that booklearning, but because I like to stretch my mind that way. But I recognise it’s not that way for everyone. As for writing v. visual, creative work in either medium feels like a similar process...you hold an idea, thought, sensation, moment in your mind, turn it over and over, and it’s quite fuzzy and indistinct at first, but then something begins to crystallise out. Maybe it’s a word. Maybe it’s a sound. Maybe it’s an image. Maybe it’s an image that conjures up certain words. Maybe it’s a word that conjures a particular image. But whatever it is it seems somehow to resonate. And so you set it down. Then another word, image, sound seems to sit alongside it in a way that is more than the sum of the two, and so you just keep going. It always feels like stepping out blindly, one foot after another, into a white fog hoping the ground will be there when you step onto it.



(<https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/sc-drawing.jpg>)

Samantha Clark working on 'Wake,' 2013, photo: Michael Wolchover

JS: Yes, that is a highly accurate description of the process! It seems that neither of us really make a line between the processes of writing and making. Something led both of us to the MAVE; perhaps a desire for rigour in the philosophical subject area that might not be found within the fine art MA (I very much liked the reference you made to the notion of the 'personal trainer' to get you through all those philosophical texts!) Perhaps this latter point, about rigour, could be a bit contentious given the current phenomenon of the interdisciplinary MA? I mean because maybe some of those fine art crossover MAs think that this is what they're offering – and I hasten to add, maybe by now they do, but contentious also because of the number of artists that are beginning to take on this 'training' – Isn't making art enough!? Stupidly, it becomes about what's 'fashionable'...if enough people do it, institutions think everyone should, and so begin to structure their courses accordingly; and so we end up with, for instance, the debacle over the PhD potentially becoming the 'terminal' degree in fine art instead of the MA – James Elkins and Brad Buckley have both written well about this.

For me, a lot about the way I work has to do with recognising the multitude of other ways that artists work; it's to do with the generosity / gift / love element of contributing to a dialogue. In short, I don't work the way I do because I think it's the 'right' or 'only' way to work – and I'm sure you don't either – it is about 'following your nose, as a way of making that sort of contribution.

SC: Yes, I see what you mean. For bookish types like us it's fine, but there are some very fine artists around for whom this is such an imposition, this expectation that you should be an artist AND an academic, that making art is no longer enough, you have to also be able to theorise it extensively, and write about it academically. I suppose it's an inevitable outcome of the process of Art Schools becoming part of Universities. It's worth pointing out that art education in Germany has not gone down this path. So there are alternative routes. And artists don't HAVE to be in the academy to practice, unlike a philosopher, for example. Artists can and do exist completely outwith the academic world, but are just subject to a whole other set of pressures – commercial ones – which they navigate with varying degrees of success and equanimity. Unless you are financially independent (with your own gallery and PR to boot), you're going to have to navigate either, or more likely both, of these worlds. And it's going to be a continual adjustment. Well, that's my thinking anyway. Maybe I'm fudging it, but wherever there is money there is an agenda. As education becomes increasingly monetised this will change, but still, for all its many faults, the world of Higher Education inspires me more than the commercial art world, and fits more closely with my values. Not a perfect fit, but good enough for me to make some creative headway.

JS: Yes, I feel that inhabiting that world works for me too. It seems the best place to be, to return to hopefulness for a moment, of formalising my hopes of contributing fully to, and of getting something back from, on-going philosophic discourse of environment (and for you too perhaps, through the field

of creative writing). Of course it is possible to contribute in this way as an artist, and though it is at least beginning to be widely accepted that artists have much to offer within such discourse, I feel that they are also generally expected to bring an artist's perspective to the mix, whatever that means! In my experience, I still think that it is difficult to shake off the perception of the artist as being some free spirit that can drift in bringing their artist's perspective, like some elixir, to every problem. I wonder if there is still the tendency to regard this perspective as a form of idealism, a sort of blue sky thinking outside of real world solutions to problems?

Perhaps it's not important but I noticed very recently, when under pressure to refine REF statements in fact, that it was, for me, very important that the written output stood as something undertaken by a person who is writing as opposed to the notion that the writing might take on some form/character as a result of having been written by an artist. Indeed it's perhaps the case that being 'An Artist' actually hinders dialogue over some things, but you go to a conference, first just as another 'someone' who has written something and then it comes out in conversation that you are also an artist, that seems to work better!?

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a platform for research and practice

Content of Nothing :: Part 8 ::it moves, actually, in a Reticulum

By [Chrisfremantle](#)



(https://ecoartscotland.files.wordpress.com/2014/09/js-untitled_2013.jpg)

Judy Spark, Untitled, digital print (300 x 140mm approximately) 2013

Judy Spark: You remarked earlier that you feel that for you it's "important to keep a lightness to creative work" and I would certainly agree with you on this and I think that this does bear even more import for visual than for written work. Other than the 'academic' aspect of some written work, I'm not sure that I can articulate exactly why I think this just yet, but it is something I think about. You also quoted Rebecca Solnit – that "the 'results' or 'outcomes' of creative work are nonlinear and unpredictable" and I would certainly agree with that, but again, this for me, seems to stand particularly for visual over written work. Perhaps is just the way that I go about a piece of writing: I know roughly what I am setting out to say, but probably not, at the beginning, how I will say it. Whereas with visual work, I think that I almost deliberately set to one side what I think I want to say, in order to allow the work to 'make itself', to borrow Carol Becker's term. Then, I work out through a sort of retrospective process exactly what it is I've been doing. The whole process is a little bit more under my control than that might make it sound, but it is a process that I have had to learn, and in fact am still learning, to trust.

Samantha Clark: Yes, the retrospective view is when we get to figure out what was actually going on. It's intrinsic to the reflective process, and here we might get bogged down in definitions of 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' – 'practice-following' research feels most apt sometimes – we do it and then figure it out later. I had a conversation with a colleague who is a social scientist recently. She seemed very surprised that we don't figure it all out first, assemble all the theory, work out the

method, and then just carry out the process we planned. The practice follows a hunch, or launches from a familiar point of departure and sees where it ends up. As you say, it can be quite instinctual. You make a leap, take a bit of a chance (it might not work), and then the research fleshes it out. I think we can become too apologetic about this. I take heart when I read about scientists and the so-called scientific method and find that it's not so very different sometimes. Kekule saw the structure of benzene in a dream. CTR Wilson built the first cloud chamber on a bit of a whim, to recreate some of the mists and coronas he'd seen walking on the hills – he had no idea his apparatus would reveal the tracks of subatomic particles. According to Nobel laureate Barbara McClintock, 'you work with so-called scientific methods to put it into their frame after you know'. (Rosen, 1994: 486) Agnes Arber recognised this thought process not as a linear progression but as a reticulated network of associations, analogies and resonances, which were translated into words and equations only with a struggle, after the original, nonverbal and empathic insight. 'The experience of one's own thinking suggests that it moves, actually, in a reticulum (possibly of several dimensions) rather than along a single line...A reticulum.... cannot be symbolized adequately in a linear succession of words.' (Arber, 1854: 18) And here's the mathematician Poincaré: 'It is by logic that we prove, but by intuition that we discover...logic teaches us that on such and such a road we are sure of not meeting an obstacle; it does not tell us which is the road that leads to the desired end. For this it is necessary to see the end from afar, and the faculty that teaches us to see is intuition.' (Poincaré, 1914: 130)

JS: Yes, for a while I think the notion of 'intuition' in art making was very unpopular, was regarded as something that only happened in 'women's art'! The next time I hear anyone slight the part of intuition in making art, I'll most certainly produce that Poincaré quote, it's perfect! I sometimes wade into the practice 'led' / 'based' / 'following' debate by stating that I have a 'research led practice'; the argument behind this will be stronger once I've worked out exactly what I mean. In any case, it has something to do with listening and with trust. I'm really interested in this notion of waiting, of listening / active listening or attentiveness in making – you touched on this earlier when we were talking about drawing. Heidegger talks about the poet's primary role as one of listening before anything is made of that experience. This waiting is as much a part of the process of making as gathering and focus are; all play a part in solving what arises, until the thing is re-solved. But the waiting/listening is difficult; I've used the notion of tuning a radio in relation to this, the idea of being on the best frequency and the act of deliberately re-tuning attention – back to Buddhist contemplative practice, or it's western equivalent, mindfulness. But what about the consequences of not listening, pouncing before things are ready; that desire to fill gaps or absences, to have the art work, poem, writing take a familiar shape....and by a deadline?!

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