

Future (re)vision: A few reflections on recollection, reception and response in practice-based art research or: Hindsight isn't always 20/20

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Abstract: This experimental paper explores questions of recollection, reception and response in practice-based art research. Staged as a fictional dialogue set on a spacecraft in 2020, it uses time travel to speculate about the future of this emerging field. By contemplating the present as the past,¹ this dialogue provides an alternative perspective from which to glimpse recent developments in art research. The paper offers live and intense consideration of the art research conference as a convention actively shaping the theory, practice and culture of this approach. Recollections of Future Reflections Research Group's² experience at The Art of Research Seminar 2007 anchor this discussion. These retellings also model the discursive practice of "re-ing," a collaborative research method developed by the group to support the auto-(re)interpretation of its practice. The art research of tomorrow imagined through this "re-ing" asks the question: "If not the future pictured here, what fates and fortunes await art research and why?"

This fictional dialogue takes place on SpaceShip7. This vessel is part of the Virgin Galactic fleet and is dedicated to research in/about/through space as the final frontier. SpaceShip7 hosts the Aerospace Art Research Residency and Future Reflections Research Group, a team of three researchers committed to exploring the theory and practice of art research, was awarded a three-month stay on the vessel in 2020. Nine months later, the group is still orbiting the Earth. It has not heard from the body supporting its mission (the High Commission for Excellence in Aerospace Art Research) for many moons and is running low on patience and supplies. While waiting, the group revisits the early years of its collaborative research and speculates about what the Commission's silence might be saying.

¹ This text is indebted to Manuela Zechner's art activist project "Future Archive," <http://www.futurearchive.org/static/playback,%20playforward.html> [accessed: May 1, 2009] and Neil Cummings' artwork "Museum Futures," <http://www.chanceprojects.com/node/417> [accessed: August 1, 2009].

² A note about authorship and ownership: "Future (Re)vision" was written by one member of Future Reflections Research Group. Forthcoming articulations of this paper with other members are possible. Also, many of the ideas discussed herein were elaborated by the group through collaborative practice. Each member holds shifting, albeit overlapping, variations of these ideas. Knowledge in Future Reflections Research Group is both individual and shared.

ACT 1

SCENE 1

(David Bowie's "Space Oddity"³ is heard offstage. ALPHA, an aging female wearing a tattered gray lab coat sits behind a monitor with her back to the audience. She types and stops, staring at the screen expectantly. She resumes typing a few moments later. This pattern is repeated three times. ALPHA breathes deeply and with exasperation. She gives up typing and rubs her face before starting again. BETA, a similar looking female also wearing a shabby grey lab coat, assumes the fetal position in a charcoal-colored Eames recliner. Lying on her side, she faces the audience. Enter GAMMA, a third aging female, similarly wearing a disheveled gray lab coat. Like the others, her hair is scraped back into a bun. All three women sport mirrored badges pinned to their left breast pockets. The music fades.)

ALPHA

(giving up again)⁴
Nothing to be done.

BETA

(advancing with short, mincing steps)
I'm beginning to come round to that opinion.

ALPHA

For months I've denied it, saying to myself, "be reasonable, you haven't yet tried everything."

BETA

And you?
(gesturing towards GAMMA)
You're quiet.

GAMMA

Quite (slash) quiet...It's just there's so much to say.
(sighs, audibly)

ALPHA

Well?

³ David Bowie, "Space Oddity," *The Best of David Bowie*, EMI [CD] 1999.

⁴ The first four lines of ACT 1, SCENE 1 quote the opening lines of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, available from http://www.samuel-beckett.net/Waiting_for_Godot_Part1.html [accessed: August 1, 2009].

GAMMA

Well...our performative papers. Or rather, our recollections of these...events. The yarns we tell ourselves to knit together the hisss-stories (slash) herstories or their (slash) there stories...The multi-headed narratives that tell themselves tales – heads and tales, heads or tails...or tails...ortails...orails...oreilles

(to ALPHA)

Did you hear that?

BETA

Shhhh! It's alright.

ALPHA

Sure. Whatever you say.

(laughs incredulously)

But you can't deny we're stuck in this tin can and everything's gone Major Tom.⁵

BETA

Shhhh! Don't say it aloud! The Commission will hear you.

GAMMA

I don't believe they're listening.

(yells at the monitor)

Did you hear that!

(pause while ALPHA, BETA and GAMMA look at the monitor expectantly)

Nothing!

(resumes the fetal position in the charcoal-colored Eames recliner)

BETA

Have you attempted touching them with the haptic emergency notification system.

ALPHA

I've tried that. I've tried them using all the senses. I've even tried contacting The Committee of Examiners and Senior Academic Management⁶ and...nothing. They won't say it plain-- they won't say it at all--but I reckon there's a problem.

GAMMA

(after several moments of silence)

So we've come full circle. It's like it was *before*.

⁵ Bowie.

⁶ In her a paper "A proper anxiety? Practice-based Ph.D.s and academic unease" Fiona Candlin explores unease in and around practice-based art Ph.D. research. She writes: "Like any other Ph.D., practice-based Ph.D.s are also the focus of much anxiety but, significantly, those anxieties reach beyond [the personal doubt of the researcher] and are often shared by supervisors, examiners and senior academic management." The dialogue proposed here playfully highlights The Committee of Examiners and Senior Academic Management as both a source of anxiety and as a leadership context for overcoming feelings of disconcertment and inferiority in the culture of art research. *Working Papers in Art and Design* 1, [2000] <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol1/candlin2.html> [accessed August 1, 2009].

ALPHA

You don't know this. Let's sit tight and wait until we receive another P.O.V., OK?

SCENE 2

(Silence punctured by the occasional Doppler effect as space junk floats past. Seven orbits later, ALPHA and BETA are seated around a small table drinking coffee from mugs branded with the Virgin Galactic logo. GAMMA remains curled up in the fetal position on the charcoal-colored Eames recliner.)

BETA

I've been thinking about something you referenced earlier...about how it used to be.

GAMMA

(with emphasis)
Before?

BETA

(with emphasis)
Before. You observed you thought we'd come full circle. Meaning?

GAMMA

Meaning my intuition tells me there's been a relapse. The High Commission's silence bespeaks concern. It may be The Culture has

(pause and then whispers)
withered.

BETA

It's conceivable. The fertility enjoyed at the time of our departure seemed unsustainable by historical metrics.

ALPHA

The Culture was sprouting—fast and wild! It was exciting to watch it outgrow itself, hybridizing unexpected species of research. This grafting depended, of course, on The Culture's courage to pare away dead wood that no longer supported its shared needs.

(with enthusiasm)
Come on, you two. Say it with me!

GAMMA

I believe I'll pass.

ALPHA

(chanted while standing and marching on the spot)
Bloom and cut! Bloom and cut!---No IFs, ANDs, or BUTs!
Everybody!

ALPHA, BETA, GAMMA

(BETA and GAMMA reluctantly join in but stay seated)
Bloom and cut! Bloom and cut!---No IFs, ANDs or BUTs!

ALPHA

Yeah. Those were the days, post-Anxiety.⁷

(smiles to herself)

Recognition from other sectors was blooming. Confidence was growing like a weed--both inside and outside The Culture.

GAMMA

(sighs)

GAMMA

We had to know a failure was coming with so many changes taking root.

(all three women sigh)

BETA

What do we do now?⁸

ALPHA

Wait.

BETA

Yes, but while waiting.

ALPHA

My vote: let's "re"⁹ to pass the orbits. We've been so focused on the future and the present, we've hardly thought about the past.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Beckett.

⁹ The prefix "re" provides a vehicle for return in Future Reflections Research Group's performative presentations and experimental papers. It serves as a way for the group to talk/write itself into existence. The method of "re-ing," to twist a noun into a verb, is modeled in part on Harri Laakso's reading of Maurice Blanchot's sense of research as "turning." Laakso explores Blanchot's sense that, "...the centre allows findings and turning, but the centre is not to be found...It is true that the turning movement in research resembles the movement of a dog that, when its prey is motionless and menacing, believes it has captured its prey by encircling it, while in fact remains solely under the fascination of the centre to whose attraction it submits" (as quoted in Laakso, 144). Laakso talks about this imaginary centre opening out through a process of "unworking." Drawing on this idea, Future Reflections Research group aims to "unthink" and subsequently "rethink" its project/process/performance/presentations. Practiced recursively through public retellings of the group's herstories, this approach defers meaning. Positions slip and fix through time and space and among the individual collaborators as well as the group. This constant shifting differs from Ph.D. research. In contrast to the thesis, which should coalesce into stable outcome(s) to qualify for recognition, the art research conducted by Future Reflections Research Group remains in perpetual flux. The group holds fast to Blanchot's sense of research as not only "...understood as a mere academic theoretical and intellectual enterprise, but also as work inside the creative space--research as the investigation of the conditions of the possibility of the art experience" (as quoted in Laakso, 143). Future Reflections Research Group deploys "re-ing" to circumscribe its practice as a space for critical and creative engagement. "Imaginary Research," in *The art of research: Research practices in art and design*, ed. Maarit Mäkelä and Sara Routarinne, [Helsinki: University of Art and Design Helsinki, 2006], 140-55.

GAMMA

It'll make a mess as it always does--the recollections, the revisions, the recycling, the reinterpretation. We'll be "re-ing" all over the place through this return. There's so much to say.

ALPHA

I say we give it a spin. The creative memory work will do us good. Members, prepare to "re".

(ALPHA presses a button near the monitor. A female voice layered over of an instrumental version of "Space Oddity"¹⁰ counts down from ten to one. The women listen to this seated upright with their hands on their knees and their eyes closed. As they listen, they roll their necks, as if preparing for intense exertion or to channel something.)

BETA

Do you (re)call our first conference abroad, *The Art of (Re)search Seminar 2007* in Helsinki, Finland?¹¹

ALPHA

Hot dog! A.R.S._07 was a long time ago.

BETA

We presented "Future (Re)sponse: Is the Question the Answer?"

ALPHA

(rubbing her hands together enthusiastically)
That's right! Those were the days of PowerPoint, before ESP*from*you*to*me! We pre(re)corded the paper and synced it with slides showing snippets of the text.

BETA

Additionally, there were three stations. One was furnished with a flip pad, where we wrote esoteric equations; at another we made cryptic gestures inspired by Constructivist ballet and air traffic control signals. There was a third station, but it's slipped my mind.

¹⁰ Bowie.

¹¹ *The Art of Research Seminar 2007* is used as an example here for three reasons. First, Future Reflections Research Group's presentation at this seminar profoundly shaped the collaboration's subsequent development. Second, the structure of the Seminar was representative of platforms for disseminating art research in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Hence, critique of this particular meeting draws attention to broader issues in contemporary art research culture. And third, the proposed experimental platform for *The Art of Research Seminar 2009* suggests the format of the 2007 seminar as been reconfigured. The developments from one event to another may serve as a barometer for observing development in the theory, practice and culture of art research more generally. Future Reflections Research Group would like to thank the hosts and delegates of *The Art of Research Seminar 2007* for their ongoing dialogue on this development.

GAMMA

(looking distantly out the window)
Airplanes.

ALPHA

(expressed in mock surprise)
(Re)ally?! I thought we'd be too high for them at an altitude of 35,786 km?!

GAMMA

(shaking her head with disappointment)
No. The third station was where we made paper airplanes out of the surveys we'd handed round and then flew them into the audience. Later the audience made planes out of their surveys and flew them back to us.

BETA

Precisely, we were interested in this (re)sponse.

GAMMA

Actually, we were interested in *their* (re)sponse--in the (re)sponse of *that* audience at *that* specific moment and the possibilities of constitutive understanding in that time and space. Our paper, "Future Response: Is the Question the Answer?" was a useful diagnostic in this (re)gard, sensitizing us to the (re)sponsibility involved in this way of working and the challenges of creating a space for (re)sponse, for the freeplay of utterances among all those assembled.

BETA

Distributed across time and space, this paper asked for several kinds of (re)sponse. There were the email surveys about art (Re)search sent out to the other seminar delegates in advance. There were the (re)sponses during the performative presentation: the folding and flying of the paper planes (a nice way to collect data); the shows of hands for the straw polls and--

GAMMA

(interrupting)
Have you forgotten our small epiphany? It was there, at A.R.S._07, we came to appreciate the different kinds of engagement--of (re)sponse--granted by the Seminar's rhythm. The more structured sessions told us they were fruitful, and we agreed. But the real harvest was elsewhere: in the quick elevator rides, reflections shared while walking to and from the hotel, a tête-à-tête over coffee at the Seminar dinner. We engaged with other delegates more intimately during these moments in between.

ALPHA

Personally, I thought the Q&A session following our performative presentation was crackerjack. I'll never forget it. The Chair of our session asked us why, given our expressed hankering for delegate (re)sponse, we'd left no time for discussion. Good question!

BETA

Because?

GAMMA

Because it fingered the chasm between what we *claimed the artwork was doing* and what *it was actually doing...in practice*. The question clipped the tension between *showing* and *telling* in our (Re)search--and this, of course, strikes at the very breast of *art as (Re)search*. We were pushing against the notion of...

(both art and research are said while signing quotations marks in the air)

"art" and (slash) as "(Re)search" as necessarily communicable. Much ink was spilt over this, over the rub between art and its interest in creating apprehensions--its commitment to staging--or even showing--new ways of perceiving the world...and...

(distinctly)

(Re)search as a knowledge acquisition enterprise intent on producing clearly articulated outcomes characterized by true, justified belief¹²--outcomes affording easy access, easy knowledge transfer.

ALPHA

Right on! Easy to share--to access (slash) assess.
(pretending to drum)

Ba-dum BUM!

GAMMA

(speaking faster and faster)

Of course, there were other notions of knowledge in circulation in 2007, notions variously (re)ferred to as "tacit," "embodied" and "ineffable" knowledge.¹³ Champions of this practical knowing (re)cognized art (Re)search as speculative engagement (re)lying on experimental and hermeneutic methods that addressed themselves to specific and situated products and processes.¹⁴

BETA

Take your time. There's no need for exertion.
(feigning a yawn)

We're not going anywhere soon and we've heard this before.

GAMMA

(Re)turning to this tension between *showing* and *telling* and the claustrophobia of communicability, the problem for us, then and now, was the way that making *claims* swaddled the art as (Re)search.

ALPHA

(said dubiously)

Swaddled?

GAMMA

The metaphor mirrors well: Swaddling is the age-old practice of tightly binding the limbs of infants against their bodies

¹² Stephen Scrivener, "The art object does not embody a form of knowledge," *Working Papers in Art and Design 2* [2002] <http://www.herts.ac.uk/artdes/research/papers/wpades/vol2/scrivenerfull.html> (accessed September 2, 2008).

¹³ Estelle Barrett, introduction to *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Inquiry*, ed. Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt [London: I.B.Taurus & Co Ltd., 2007], 3.

¹⁴ Henk Borgdorff, *The debate on research in the arts*. [Sensuous Knowledge 02], 23.

GAMMA (Continued)

with strips of cloth. There was a belief this (re)striction was good for them. It kept them safe. It was also held to be essential for developing proper posture. Later, of course, John Locke among others determined swaddling was inhumane.¹⁵ I am suggesting, by analogy, that claims swaddle the artwork in art (Re)search. They may insure it has proper posture as (Re)search, but they severely (re)strict the artwork's capacity for self-expression.

BETA

What you're advancing is a sense of the artwork--that the artwork in art (Re)search is barren when the artist-(re)searcher is (re)quired to articulate its significance. I presume this is what you mean by the distinction between *showing* and *telling*.¹⁶

ALPHA

Oh sure, I remember this being a problem in art (Re)search presentations when PowerPoint was all the rage, and earnest artist (re)searchers would stand behind laptops set on plinths and--

GAMMA

You mean podiums.

ALPHA

Yeah podiums. That's what I said. Artist-(re)searchers would stand behind

(with emphasis)

podiums and show images of their work and (re)port on their

(with emphasis)

inquiry. But it was a "big ask", you know, to make claims without declaring intentions. We weren't the only ones who made the mistake of interpreting our artwork in this way.

BETA

This presentation scheme effectively confounded the art coefficient,¹⁷ one of the great organizing principles of late twentieth-century art.

(turns to ALPHA)

I'm (re)ferring here to Marcel Duchamp's sense that the viewer completes the--

ALPHA

Thanks, B. I'm familiar with the concept.

BETA

To (re)turn to your curious metaphor, GAMMA. It seems the "show and tell" approach of art (Re)search presentations, with their tendency towards *telling* rather than *showing*, not only swaddled the artwork but also the viewer (slash)

¹⁵ Wikipedia contributors, "Swaddling," *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swaddling> [Accessed August 15, 2009].

¹⁶ Joseph Kosuth, "The Play of the Unsayable: A Preface and Ten Remarks on Art and Wittgenstein," in *Art After Philosophy and After: Collected Writings, 1966-1990*. [London: MIT Press, 1991], 245-250.

¹⁷ Marcel Duchamp, "The Creative Act," in *The Writings of Marcel Duchamp*, eds. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer Paterson [New York: De Capo Press, 1989], 138-140.

BETA (Continues)

audience by denying them an opportunity to interpret the artwork as (Re)search and--

GAMMA

The violence these presentations did to the artworks was painful, matched only by the strangeness of the disconnect.

(All pause for a silent count of three.)

ALPHA

The disconnect?

GAMMA

Yes, the disconnect. All too often the (re)searcher said her art (Re)search was doing one thing but the artwork--even in (re)production (slash) (re)presentation--proposed something else.

ALPHA

But surely there's space for multiple interpretations?
(pauses while looking back and forth at the others)
And besides, I'm thinking it's a question of timing. You know what I mean?

(pause)

It's one thing to make claims about your artwork as art (Re)search when it's in process. It's another to (re)fect on it afterwards. And the kicker is this: Many of these conferences were designed to support and encourage emergent artist (Re)searchers while they're still in the throes of their Ph.D. and--

BETA

(interrupting)

But isn't sustained (re)reflection (slash) (re)flexion what distinguished art (Re)search from art more generally in this era?

ALPHA

That's a strange way to put it. It almost sounds like you're saying practitioners who weren't doing (or hadn't done) Ph.D.s weren't (re)fective (slash) (re)flexive.

(looks at BETA disapprovingly)

But whatever. That's another discussion. Right now I'm just (re)hearsing the observation that art (Re)search (re)sists a *priori* knowledge. More often than not, the revelation in this
(with emphasis)

inquiry is often only (re)cognized in (re)trospect--a *posteriori*.¹⁸ And as part and parcel of this, methods in art (Re)search Ph.D.s typically present too late to be staked at the beginning of the degree. We might consider this when discussing the history (slash) herstory of art (Re)search presentations and their (re)ception.

BETA

You've slipped from "interpretation," to "knowledge" to "methods" to "history (slash) herstory" but your point, I

¹⁸ Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge, "The Enactment of Thinking: creative practice and research degrees," *Journal of Visual Arts Culture* 2[2002]: 6.

BETA (Continues)

believe, (re)lates to how things shift through what used to be termed

(with emphasis)

"writing up" the (Re)search.

ALPHA

Not exactly. I was considering the logic behind The Culture's push for new ways of disseminating (Re)search, both work in progress and "(Re)search expressions," a term that later eclipsed "(Re)search outcomes" in fidelity to art. Art (Re)search became more attentive to art's interest in creating apprehensions and uncertainties and proposing new encounters for understanding. But I'll take any opportunity to riff on writing and (slash) as art (Re)search and--

GAMMA

(interrupts with much annoyance)

And here we go again. This issue has preoccupied you since--

ALPHA

Since I noticed this peculiar situation. There was a time around 2009 when you couldn't get writing as art (Re)search noticed for love or money. But plop the very same text into the discipline of arts writing, and it was welcomed with open arms. Why was that?

(pause)

Anyone?

(pause)

Anyone?

(pause)

GAMMA

Are you really going to make us say it?

ALPHA

I'll say it. It's hard to believe now, but there was a sense back then in some circles--

BETA

(interrupting)

Only in some circles

ALPHA

--in enough circles, that writing in the context of art (Re)search was for, well, as you mentioned, B., "writing up"--that is, the written aspect of the thesis. It took some time for The Culture to embrace the difference between writing as art (Re)search and writing on art (Re)search.

(pauses to sip coffee, begins speaking line into her cup, while slurping and wiping her mouth.)

You didn't need an object to have an artwork. Many types of text were possible. But you had to have a difference between text as art and text as, well, something else. "Art, it can be argued, *describes* (re)ality. But unlike language, artworks--it can also be argued--simultaneously describe *how* they describe it...What art shows in such a manifestation is, indeed, how it *functions*. This is best (re)vealed in works which feign to *say*, but do so as an art proposition and (re)veal the difference (while showing its similarity) with language."¹⁹ Artist-writers²⁰ explored the threshold of what

¹⁹ Kosuth, 247.

ALPHA (Continues)

writing as art could *show*. These mavericks enacted the *unsayable* through language by experimenting with stress, pace, rhythm, pitch, projection, intonation, syntactic framing through word order, the emotive possibilities of punctuation, the noise and--²¹

BETA

We're beholden to their efforts.

ALPHA

Yeah. Among other things, they helped our performative presentations and written papers (re)gister as something closer to art by creating a context for this approach.

GAMMA

Are you forgetting the impact of new technologies on writing in (slash) on (slash) around (slash) art (Re)search? I'm amused, BETA, that you've not (re)ferenced this given your aspirations of being tech savvy.

BETA

Touché. New technologies were impacting across arts education. The telematic society enacted an epochal shift in this (re)gard, a movement from linear thinking (and writing) to more rhizomatic forms of networked thinking embodied in digital technologies.²² The essay, the written thesis, and the 5000-word conference paper were reconfigured into forms that drew out the verbal and the sensual as specialized but nevertheless contingent modes of meaning making. As information moved across symbolic media, heretofore imperceptible significance was transcribed, and the tension between image and text seemed to dissolve through technologies that more easily conjured up polydimensional performances of thought.²³

ALPHA

It was the kids.

BETA

Correct. The Now Generation was an important catalyst in this (re)gard. Their new literacies, acquired through the daily practice of Web 2.0 and subsequent technologies, pressurized this epochal shift. On the one hand, these emerging (re)searchers had neither the attention nor the patience to work in the ways of our and older generations; on the other, the Now Generation simply couldn't grasp the historical preoccupation of (Re)search with an "original claim to new knowledge".

(smiles, amused)

²⁰ I am here referring to the work of Mary Anne Francis, Jennifer Higgin, Maria Fusco, Kate Love and others who helped draw attention through their practice to writing as art research.

²¹ Kerstin Mey, "The Gesture of Writing," in *Thinking through Art: Reflections on Art as Research*, ed. Katy Macleod and Lin Holdridge [London: Routledge, 2006], 206.

²² Ibid, 205.

²³ Ibid.

BETA (Continues)

They took as given that knowledge was always already collaboratively produced. "The Divorce of Arnolfini" in 2012 was a test case in this (re)gard.

GAMMA

Continue. There's pleasure in (re)calling this growth in The Culture.

BETA

Not only was it one of the first collaboratively authored practice-based art Ph.D.s, but it was also manifest entirely through text messaging that was syndicated for (re)ading and (re)sponse all over the World and beyond. Resultantly, the static hardcopy format of the traditional Ph.D. became much softer and more porous and--

(A chorus of women's voices coming from the monitor says, "The work punctuates the flow of discourse across its surface, and its meaning becomes apparent through this process."²⁴)

GAMMA

(leaping up off the charcoal-colored Eames recliner)
Well it's about time! ALPHA, quick. What does the calibration indicate? Is it a message from the High Commission?

ALPHA

(turning to the monitor and flicking various switches)
I'm not sure. The system hasn't (re)gistered it. It may be an old message that's warped back through (re)collection. The system appears to be "re-ing" right along with us.

GAMMA

A (re)minder a (re)mainder.
(sighs, audibly and returns to the charcoal-colored Eames recliner)

SCENE 3

GAMMA

If we've finished "re-ing," I'd prefer to orbit in silence for a while. We've discussed questions of (re)ception, (re)sponse and (re)form in art (Re)search around the time of A.R.S._07 and I'm growing weary.

ALPHA

(energetically)
Not quite yet. We haven't discussed the semiotics of A.R.S._07 as a space.²⁵ The way the Seminar signified by

²⁴ Tim O'Riley, "An Inaudible Dialogue" *Working Papers in Art and Design* 4 [2006] http://sitem.herts.ac.uk/artdes_research/papers/wpades/vol4/torfull.html [accessed August 1, 2009].

²⁵ In "Communication and the Semiotics of Space," Elliot Gaines writes: "The study of space as a semiotic phenomenon suggests that the meaning of space, as a sign, is generally understood in relation to other concerns. Communication draws attention to the content of messages while space contributes to the meaning of those messages without being obvious about its role in constructing meaning." *Journal of Creative Communications*, 1, no 2 [2006]: 273.

ALPHA (Continues)

virtue of it being, well, "conference-esque", and I, for one, (re)call this was key. It was structured like a conference and sponsored by and held at a university. Events like this were complicit in conditioning the significance of the art (Re)search...as well--

BETA

(interrupting)

Of course, the time-honored structure of the academic conference was the primary vector for distributing art research in the early twenty-first century and before. This may seem peculiar with today's face-to-face online Althings²⁶, but that was how it was back then.

ALPHA

Yeah, but I don't get it. Much was made about the semiotics of the White Cube²⁷ as the primary organ of the art world(s), but why weren't we thinking more about the semiotics of the conference? Art students were steeped in critique of the ideological strategies of display embedded in the gallery, how the White Cube signified its content as Art, with a capital "A". The conference operated similarly, as--

BETA

(interrupting)

A kind of (Re)search universal, an ideal context for disseminating knowledge outcomes. A familiar modernist insight, you might say, albeit now old fashioned.

ALPHA

OK. But there was already a well-established tradition of site-specific work by 2007; artists had been operating outside of the gallery for decades. Why do you reckon the conference structure predominated instead of more open platforms for dissemination--aside, that is, for the obvious (re)ason, which is

(with emphasis)

That the time-honored academic format of the conference lent an air of

(also with emphasis)

(re)spectability to art (Re)search as an emerging field of serious inquiry?

GAMMA

(said under her breath while picking lint off her coat)

Air of (re)spectability? Miasma more like it.

²⁶ Bruno Latour writes: "Of all the eroded meanings left by the slow crawling of political geology, none is stranger to consider than the Icelandic Althing since the ancient 'thingmen' --what we would call "congressmen" or MPs-- had the amazing idea of meeting in a desolate and sublime site which happens to sit smack in the middle of the fault line that marks the meeting place of the Atlantic and European tectonic plates." Here "Althing" has been adopted and adapted to denote a fictional equivalent of the contemporary conference. "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik -- or How to Make Things Public," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005], available from <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/articles/article/96-DINGPOLITIK2.html> [accessed July 23, 2008].

²⁷ Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986).

BETA

Yes of course, concerns about (re)spectability predominated discussions of art (Re)search, and they seemed especially acute at this moment in time.²⁸ This goes back to the Anxiety that GAMMA intuited 7.03 orbits ago, and her fears it may have (re)lapsed. And don't forget The Culture didn't know, then, how the new technologies would impact the quality of art (Re)search. There were concerns depth would be compromised through the workings of The Now Generation, which favored more distributed, iterative and fragmentary forms. Forget not these were the days when rigor was fetishized at the expense of (re)levance.²⁹ There was titanic Anxiety over the outputs of practice-based art (Re)search as necessarily heterogeneous and amorphous, making its assessment difficult.³⁰ The discursive character of the conference structure was tyrannical in this (re)gard. Those verbal presentations were a mode of dissemination quite antithetical to the tradition of art rooted in contemplation through visual engagement, however ocularcentric this approach proved to be.

GAMMA

I'm not sure I agree with you about this... "tyranny" of the conference structure. It didn't do the kind of violence you are suggesting to *all* the artworks as research. Many of them *yes*, but not all, especially those produced for the conference. Of course the problems with producing art research specifically for an academic conference are the stuff of another discussion. So instead let's (re)turn to the problem of making claims. That wasn't our project anyway, at least not at *A.R.S._07*. We weren't (re)porting on our (re)search findings in our paper, "Future (Re)sponse: Is the Question the Answer?".

(sighs)

We aspired to *actually conduct* art (Re)search--to make art--using the presentation as a platform and the conference as a site-specific context. And yet our performative presentation

GAMMA

didn't easily (re)gister as either art or (Re)search, and you're missing a much more nuanced sense of why.

ALPHA

Which is?

GAMMA

The rub between the semiotics of the conference as a self-proclaimed academic space and the ontological character of "art space"³¹--which brings us back to the White Cube. Have you forgotten how in practice, perceptions of art (re)maind

²⁸ In 2007, universities in the United Kingdom were preparing to submit their research outcomes to the 2008 Research Assessment Exercise (R.A.E.), which compared and contrasted their efforts. The demands of this submission raised questions about what comprises "respectable" art research.

²⁹ John Wood, "A culture of academic rigor: does design culture really need it?" *Design Journal* 3, no 1[2000]: 44-57.

³⁰ Candlin.

³¹ Peter Osborne, "Non-places and the spaces of art," *The Journal for Architecture*, 6 (2001): 192.

GAMMA (Continues)

astonishingly crude back then. This wasn't only the case in art (Re)search but the art world(s) as well. In theory, art could be anything. But in practice, some expressions (re)vealed themselves more effortlessly than others, owing, in part, to being snug with tradition. I'm thinking here of painting, sculpture and--

BETA

(interrupting)

Back to the White Cube and the Artist Placement Groups's 1970 battle cry that "Context is half the work!".³² This call to action (re)maind (re)sonant some forty years later, with the gallery still serving to demarcate art.

(ALPHA moves to object)

(BETA puts up her hand to stop ALPHA'S interjection)

And before, ALPHA, you object and insist that site-specific practice was well established by 2007, you might (re)member this variety of art making was (re)cognized as a negation of gallery-based work. In other words: because site-specific practice was defined by what it was not, it still (re)lied on the art space of the gallery for it's definition. My point is simply this: for art to "present" outside of the gallery, it had to (re)create the ontological character of "art-space" [(re)ad the White Cube], thereby transforming the semiotic character of the space it occupied.³³ For only then would it "present" as art and not something else.

ALPHA

I catch your drift. You're talking about the conditions of art, insinuating, I think, there was a failure to create these conditions in our performative presentation for A.R.S_07, and this helps to explain why it didn't "present" to use your word, as art.

GAMMA

The artwork wasn't "present". It didn't *present* for many (re)asons, among them the conference structure, which (re)sisted the signification of its content as anything other than "academic"--or at least aspiring to this (tasting her words) distinction.

ALPHA

You're saying our paper, "Future (Re)sponse: Is the Question the Answer?" didn't have a snowball's hope of being (re)ceived as art in this context.

GAMMA

(nodding slowly)

(Re)portage *on* art (Re)search was encouraged here and at other art (Re)search conferences; though, as we've (re)hearsed, it wasn't easily accommodated by the conference format at the best of times. But (re)portage *as* art (Re)search simply didn't (re)present.

³² Peter Eleey, "Context is Half the Work." *Freize*, 111(Nov-Dec 2007) available from http://www.frieze.com/issue/article/context_is_half_the_work/ [accessed: July 2, 2009].

³³ Osborne.

BETA

The situation was further complicated in our case. We thought we were doing one thing but it was only through actually doing it--through putting our hunches, impulses and intuitions into practice--that we (re)cognized our aspirations to do something else.

GAMMA

We hadn't yet intuited our interest in developing a *theory and practice of collaborative art (Re)search as an approach to making art as (re)search*. It was only later, much later--and through much "re-ing"--of turning the (Re)search around and around and passing it back and forth among us...

(pauses and rubs her hands as if sensing something)

that we...

(looks down and then out the window)

that we (re)cognized this desire.

BETA

For *A.R.S._07*, we were inspired...

ALPHA

(laughs jokingly)

Inspired?

GAMMA

Yes, we were inspired--we aspired to make an artwork--to "present" a performance--*about* art (Re)search. Our paper, "Future Response: Is the Question the Answer?" took art (Re)search as its content and form.

ALPHA

Self-(re)ferential to a fault, borderline solipsistic, but we won't go there.

GAMMA

The performative presentation said it was creative meta-art (Re)search, with its "artness" (re)siding in the speculative play of forms, the codes and conventions of (Re)search as an apparatus for creating new knowledge. The (Re)search question, methodological approaches and theoretical context, the dissemination of findings, and above all "clarity" and "rigor". But it was that--

(emotively)

That which is often othered by these conventions--the unknowing, the unsayable--we hoped to voice through the stations and surveys and flying the paper airplanes. It was about enacting an encounter. Yes, it was about creating space for not knowing (slash) unknowing and not saying (slash) unsaying in the Seminar.

ALPHA

You'll (re)call we were surprised for a couple of reasons. First, we assumed other (re)searchers (slash) (Re)search groups would performatively engage with the site-specificity of the Seminar. We were also surprised our playful presentation seemed to leave others at *A.R.S._07*... well, dumbfounded. There was very little (re)action--at least not initially.

BETA

Though some useful commentary was forthcoming in the moments in between when we engaged other delegates more intimately. I, for one, had a fascinating conversation about the ethics and efficacy of performance as a compelling mode of argumentation and--

GAMMA

(interrupting)

I beg your pardon,

(with emphasis)

I had that conversation with a delegate from Sudan. Not you. You're appropriating my memories. You see, this is what "re-ing" does to us. We blur the boundaries of our individual herstories into a shared consciousness and--

ALPHA

(interrupting)

Future (Re)sponse was experimental. It took risks. If we were smart, we'd (re)cuperate what I perceived as dumbfounded-ness. We'd call it "shock" instead. Shock is good for art--very (re)tro, reminiscent of the historical avant-garde. Shock was all the rage at *Documenta XIV*. And besides, dumbfounded-ness may have been an appropriate (re)sponse, given our interest in using our paper to create space for the "unknowable and unsayable".

GAMMA

Developmentally, *A.R.S._07* streamed our (re)search through new vectors. But the question arising from this interface only whispered itself to us later, much later. It said: "What are the necessary characteristics and conditions of an art (Re)search paper to be (re)ceived as performative art (Re)search?" Yes, *A.R.S._07* catalyzed our subsequent (Re)search into--Shhh! Did you sense that?

(Pulsating lights illuminate each of the three researchers.)

ALPHA

Finally, The High Commission.

BETA

(rubbing her hands together slowly)

Is it them at last? I perceive an embodied communication. What does it mean?

GAMMA

Shush. Be still and feel.

ACT II

SCENE I

(ALPHA, BETA and GAMMA appear frozen in their previous positions, basked in the pulsating lights, which flash off their mirrored badges. The same female voice heard in the countdown earlier reads the following text: "A recurrent

scene in sci-fi movies shows the earth withdrawing from the spacecraft until it becomes a horizon, a beach ball, a grapefruit, a golf ball, a star. With the changes in scale, responses slide from the particular to the general...Horizontalities don't seem to have the same moral virtue...But history, the view from the departing spacecraft, is different. As the scale changes, layers of time are superimposed and through them we project perspectives with which to recover and correct the past. No wonder art gets bollixed up in this process; its history, perceived through time, is confounded by the picture in front of your eyes, a witness ready to change testimony at the slightest perceptual provocation. History and the eye have a profound wrangle at the center of this 'constant' we call tradition.)"³⁴

(Blackout.)

³⁴ O'Doherty, 13.