2019

An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

Malcolm Whittaker

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An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

This exegesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from The University of Wollongong.

By
Malcolm Whittaker.

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March, 2019.
Thesis Certification

I, Malcolm Whittaker, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Law, Humanities and the Arts, at The University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This thesis has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Malcolm Whittaker.

Acknowledgements

I would like to start this exegesis by acknowledging and paying respect to the traditional custodians of the lands on which you are reading it, and to pay my respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging. The majority of the following words of this exegesis were written and revised and re-written on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and it is amongst the Indigenous knowledge systems of this land that my own research has primarily taken place.

This research has truly been an adventure. For the rewards I have reaped from this adventure, many thanks and much appreciation are due to my supervisor Lucas Ihlein. His rigour, thoughtfulness, critical insights and diplomacy have taught me more than could possibly be contained in this humble exegesis. I also owe thanks to secondary supervisor Luke Johnson, for the feedback, support and guidance across the finish line, as well as to Sarah Miller and Chris Ryan, who played significant roles in providing feedback as secondary supervisors in earlier stages of my research.

Further thanks and appreciation are due to all the hosts and participants of Ignoramus Anonymous during my research, and to Marissa Gillies, Alice Roberts and Clare Britton for their design work, as well as to all the hosts, attendees, participants and collaborators on my many other projects during this time. Indeed, to anyone I have worked with or played with across the period of my research, please know that you are part of the enriching experience this has been and contributions I have made.

Most of all, I am indebted to my partner Laura Caesar. Her patience and support made this possible. Her love means more and teaches me more than any of it.

This is for our children, Charlie and Lola, who will never read a word of it.
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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the processes and outcomes of my participatory performance project *Ignoramus Anonymous*. The project takes the form of support group meetings for ignorance. Between 2013 and 2019, meetings were held across artworld and everyday settings. *Ignoramus Anonymous* was partly inspired by the “intellectual adventure” of French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who in 1818 undertook an exploration of pedagogy by attempting to teach what he himself did not know. He concluded that all people were equally intelligent and referred to his philosophical methodology, centred on the removal of explication, as “intellectual emancipation”. My thesis extends this exploration of pedagogy through a creative arts practice-based research methodology. It asks: ‘What might result from a collective turn towards ignorance?’ And: ‘How might such a turn be instigated through contemporary art practice?’

These questions form the starting point for my thesis. They have been explored by placing this exegetical document and the processes of *Ignoramus Anonymous* into a feedback loop with one another. Taking further inspiration from Jacotot, I have thought of this as an intellectual adventure in ignorance. The aim of this adventure has been to tease out and articulate new knowledge produced by the narrative of the adventure itself, including the value of reveling in ignorance with strangers, and how the aesthetic experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous* can persist beyond the end of each support group meeting, emanating into the world beyond the artwork.

Throughout this exegesis, I argue that *Ignoramus Anonymous* involves the creation of a context, produced through an art practice that comprises the re-framing of social forms as play spaces for participants. This discussion is supported by experiences and testimonies of support group participants, and through critical engagement with key ideas, including French philosopher Jacques Rancière’s analysis of emancipation within what he terms the “aesthetic regime of art”, and
American philosopher John Dewey’s call for the reintegration of art with the processes of everyday life.

There are three significant contributions made through this thesis. The first is the production of a body of work that demonstrates how ignorance can support transformative relations between participants in socially engaged art. The second is a demonstration of how this turn towards ignorance can be achieved through using “play frames” within the artwork. Finally, by reflecting on the production of ‘art’ that is simultaneously ‘not-art’, this thesis contributes to broader philosophical debates around intellectual emancipation and the politics at play between art and life.
Pages are presented to the public exiting an elevator. The maps possess no information for locating where they actually are. They are to be used by individuals to imagine where they could be at this exact moment.


A walk in the park is taken in memory of lost pet dogs.


A teeth-brushing service is offered at The Art Gallery of Western Australia.


As an artist, my projects have taken the form of theatre and gallery situations, site-specific and public interventions, performance lectures, film shoots, phone calls, teeth-brushing services, walks in the park, games of chess, letters in the mail and the borrowing of books from the library. Three examples of my projects are captured above.

The questions that initially drove my research were: What holds these projects together? What are they about, and what are they really about?

The hunch with which I commenced my research was that play is what brings these disparate endeavours together. I thought of my projects as play in the sense that audiences and viewers were playing within them. Projects were performances that did not happen for them, but rather with them and between them. Audiences were players within the projects. Without being entirely sure what I meant by these notions, or where they might lead, my research adventure began.
Prefering for the Adventure

I began my research by reading within the existing canon on the subject of play. Invariably, every text made mention of the difficulties of defining the term. Psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget noted in 1962 that “the many theories of play expounded in the past are clear proof that the phenomenon is difficult to understand” (Piaget 1962, p. 147). Anthropologist Stephen Miller suggests that the difficulty of definition “lies in the fact that we are trying to discuss something of which everyone has a good intuitive grasp but little or nothing in the way of concepts that lend themselves to articulation” (Miller 1973, p. 87). The articulation I became most fond of was that espoused by anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson in A Theory of Play and Fantasy (1972). Bateson thought of play as a frame, in the sense that it is a metacommunicative message that separates an activity from the more serious business of real life. It is a tool to open up new dialogues and understandings between living beings (Bateson 1972). The ‘frame of play’ recurs repeatedly in the existing discourse on play, and it is useful for my research because the ‘frame’ is an active way of contextualising and defining the active subject of play, and my art projects involve active (re)contextualising as well. The frame of play is what informs the players and non-players that the play act is beginning, is taking place and is over (Schechner 1993, pp. 25-26). Bateson’s theory of framing concurs with Miller’s solution for defining play: by stressing that it is “a way of organizing activity, not a particular activity; it is a syntax, not a vocabulary” (Miller 1973, p. 94).

I began to think of the experience of my projects as unfolding through a play frame, which was often placed over the non-art situation of an existing social form or ritual. This ‘frame of play’ was acknowledged as prevalent in the early stages of my own professional art practice. Critic Jana Perkovic notes the idea of framing within my work when she describes my art practice as
sitting broadly within the British-inflected tradition of live art in which the unpredictable, artless liveness of the event is its chief intriguing ingredient, and art-ness obtained almost exclusively from the framing of the encounter...and much of the enjoyment seems to derive from testing the elasticity of the artful boundaries (Perkovic 2011).

My particular use of the play frame has developed to foster a certain ambiguity in the artworks I create. This ambiguity stems from the fact that the play frame is not always clear to the audience or viewer of the work, and projects often remain situated within everyday activities. One project that exemplifies this is the support group for ignorance I devised in the form of monthly meetings at libraries, which commenced in Sydney in 2013. In the everyday context of these library locations, the play frame of the project remains unclear. I soon came to the idea that such projects are simultaneously ‘art’ and ‘not-art’. By ‘not art’ I mean that the projects legitimately function within the appropriated form and are more than a representational performance of that form. The performances of the social forms include, for example, a sincere eulogy for deceased pets, or a quite genuine support group for ignorance.

I can trace an unconscious realisation of this art/not-art duality back to my project My Best Friend, which involved walks in the park taken in memory of deceased and departed pet dogs. When first presented in the regional Victorian town of Castlemaine in 2012, I was struck by how moving the project turned out to be. What started as a playful eulogy and bittersweet celebration became a legitimate funeral procession that enabled the expression of the disenfranchised grief that results from losing a pet. Melbourne-based artist and academic Robert Walton observed that participants in My Best Friend shared “stories of beloved deceased pets in a genuinely touching and honest ritual created as a way for people to talk openly about the unspoken loss of their non-human family members” (Walton 2019, p. 75).

1 For more on My Best Friend see My Best Friend: Critical Response (Anderson 2012).
An Adventure in Ignorance

Whilst I was thinking these ideas through, the support group project *Ignoramus Anonymous* emerged as my central focus. It emerged for two reasons. Firstly, it was an ongoing project that was being performed with regularity throughout my candidature. Secondly, it embodied my research in the way that it involved critical re-thinking and turning towards the unknown. This was an exciting new course in my adventure, and the real beginning of my research. It was a turn from researching into art practice to researching *through* art practice. It was a turn from researching into play to researching through *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an act of play.

Artist and scholar Barbara Bolt suggests that when artists engage in practice-based research, what unfolds is “creative research” that “doesn’t describe something but rather [...] does something in the world” (Strange 2012, p. 3). With the shift towards researching through *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an act of play, my research was inseparable from the performative act of the support groups for ignorance. I commenced with my tacit and embodied knowledge as the practising artist behind *Ignoramus Anonymous*. I then engaged in a mixed research methodology that combined modes of critical reflection and conceptual exploration in relation to the performance of these support group meetings, with each mode feeding back into the other and into *Ignoramus Anonymous* itself. This is the back-story as to how I came to model my research methodology around *Ignoramus Anonymous*, from an initial interest in the role of play in my growing body of work, to focus on what this one project in particular might be *doing*. I will turn now in more detail to *Ignoramus Anonymous* and introduce how this research was conducted through the project.
An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

Introduction: Ignoramus Anonymous

*Ignoramus Anonymous* is a support group for ignorance. It involves coming together with strangers for an hour-long meeting to share and discuss what you do not know, and what you do not know that you do not know. It is a space to ask questions and receive support, without looking for answers to those questions. After attending an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting, curator and writer Anneke Jaspers recalled a range of topics about which participants felt ill-informed, with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration or guilt:

Questions regarding the crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations, questions around the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, and the meaning of neoliberalism (Jaspers 2014).

Through these discussions, each meeting provides collective support for the ignorance that is latent in every individual – ignorance that ranges from the everyday to the increasingly complex. It is not that you learn anything specific at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, except for maybe an awareness of the gaps in what you know and understand, but my hunch was that the experience of the meetings could be a form of pedagogy in itself. The meetings offered a space to ask questions and receive this support. The idea of ‘support as pedagogy’ became a key idea underpinning the project. *Ignoramus Anonymous* is a supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be confessed and accepted. Through sitting in the simple circle of the support group, I developed the idea that our support produced a sense of intellectual emancipation and revealed an equality of intelligence in participants. The ideas of ‘intellectual emancipation’ and ‘equality of intelligence’ became the motivating ideas underpinning and troubling my research. These are the ideas that will be explored in this exegesis, particularly through the twin lenses of play and ignorance.
An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

Social Form

*Ignoramus Anonymous* deals directly with both play and ignorance. To experience *Ignoramus Anonymous* is to spend an hour playing in ignorance. The work appropriates the social form of the support group meeting, creating what one participant referred to as a “playgroup for adults” (Leary 2019), a playgroup that is not about specific learning outcomes but about sitting with our ignorance together. A key characteristic of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an artwork is in this playful collective embrace of what we do not know, rather than hiding or striving to overcome our ignorance. A primary concern of my thesis is the exploration of the processes and insights generated by this embrace of ignorance and play within the artwork.

In order to embrace ignorance I have used my artistic practice of *playing-with* the social form of the support group, in a way that maintains the integrity and consistency of that source form but also creates an art/not-art simultaneity within the project. The resultant support groups for ignorance have been presented inside and outside of artworld contexts. Between 2013 and 2019, *Ignoramus Anonymous* has been presented in the form of monthly library-based meetings at the State Library NSW (Sydney, 2013-2014), Waverley Council Library (Sydney, 2014-2015), and Frontyard Projects Space (Sydney, 2016-2017), as well as at Thirroul Community Centre (Thirroul, 2017 and 2019). It was also presented as part of The Junction Arts Festival (Launceston, 2013), the Performance Space *Sonic Social* program at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney, 2014), The Festival of Live Art at Arts House (Melbourne, 2014), at The Wheeler Centre (Melbourne, 2014), at Bondi Pavilion Gallery (Sydney, 2015), and as part of “The Big Anxiety” Festival (Sydney, 2017).

1 Frontyard is a Sydney-based ‘Not-Only-Artist Run Initiative’ that houses a non-lending library. This library is founded on the decommissioned Australia Council Research Library. It is now a growing collection of material related to, and generated by, the Australian arts community. For more information on the library see http://www.frontyardprojects.org/library/.

2 For a complete list of all *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings and locations please refer to page 8 of the appendix.
The Turn

As I have been playing with *Ignoramus Anonymous* throughout these public presentations and within this exegesis, the adventure has resulted in many turns and changes in direction. What has resulted is an approach in which each of these turns have been made through the art project (*Ignoramus Anonymous*) and the research project (also *Ignoramus Anonymous*) constantly feeding back into one another.

The metaphor of the ‘the turn’ recurs throughout my research. It has become a fitting way to discuss my intellectual adventure in ignorance, whether that turn be towards something, or away from or around something, or even colloquially the ‘turning over’ of ideas throughout the research. At each turn a connection has been made and attended to, and an attempt made to tease out new understandings and meanings and feed them back into the ongoing adventure. Curator and critical theorist Irit Rogoff notes that learning itself is always “a series of turns” (Rogoff 2008, p. 8), and her discussion of the “educational turn” in curating and contemporary art is what partly inspired me to adopt the analogy of ‘the turn’ in my own practice-based research. Of equal inspiration was art historian and critic Claire Bishop’s theorisation of the “social turn” made by artists of the late 1990s and early 2000s towards collectivity, collaboration and direct engagement in their work (Bishop 2006, p. 178). It is in the field of this “social turn” that I locate *Ignoramus Anonymous*, as a participatory performance produced through what I refer to as my socially engaged live art practice, but which can also be thought of as socially engaged art, dialogical art or relational aesthetics, and these discourses will also be considered throughout this exegesis.

Throughout this exegesis, I place *Ignoramus Anonymous* in dialogue with the work of other artists in this field, particularly those involving pedagogy and a playing-with of social forms to produce what I observe to be an art/not-art duality. Before doing so, I will first map a sample of the artistic peers that have shaped my field of
study, and the historical precedents that have allowed our field to be understood. Beginning with early examples of artists who played-with and re-framed the everyday as part of their practice, I will chart a linear trajectory of my field, from early pioneers to my contemporary peers, who practice socially engaged live art and pedagogical aesthetics.

Re-Framing the Everyday

My field of practice and research can be traced at least as far back as early 20th century Europe, when Marcel Duchamp began exhibiting readymade found objects as works of art as part of the Dada movement. Questioning the very notion of art, examples of Duchamp’s provocations included a bottle rack, shovel, urinal and bicycle wheel. Duchamp pioneered the re-framing of these ‘readymades’ as works of art. Duchamp also re-framed activities like playing chess as art. Indeed, he eventually ‘quit’ art to become a chess player, and it was with Duchamp’s famous notion of art as a game and games as art in the early 20th Century that art history first began to observe artists’ engagement in play (Lushetich 2011, p. 24). In time, Duchamp’s playful everyday readymades, such as the urinal Fountain (1917), transcended their initial status as amusing and offensive anti-art objects (Camfield 1990, p. 65). Critic Saul Ostrow notes that it was not until modernism had ostensibly run its course, by the end of the 1950s, that Duchamp’s avant-gardist practices that “were once meant to challenge art became a way to make art” (Roth and Katz 1998, p. x). It was at this point that artists became increasingly interested in what Duchamp describes as the necessity for the creative act to be in contact with the external world, and that the creative act is not performed by the artist alone (Duchamp 1959, p. 78).

In this period, in 1950s and 1960s United States, artist Allan Kaprow is another key historical player in re-framing everyday activities as an artistic practice. Inspired by philosopher John Dewey’s Art as Experience (1934), Kaprow’s work can be positioned in the flux of what Dewey called “the everyday events, doings, and
sufferings that are universally recognised to constitute experience” (Dewey 1934, p. 2). Kaprow embraced the conventions of the everyday as readymade forms for his lifelike art. Kaprow’s lifelike art “did not merely label life as art. It was continuous with that life, inflecting, probing, testing, and even suffering it, but always attentively” (Kaprow 1993, p. 206). Brushing one’s teeth, boarding a bus, dressing in front of a mirror, telephoning a friend, melting an ice cube, are examples of what Kaprow positioned as ‘Happenings’ and ‘Activities’, which create experiences that are situational, operational, structural, subject to feedback, and open participants to learning (Kaprow 1993, p. xvii). Kaprow’s idea was to keep the line between the work and daily life as fluid and indistinct as possible (Kaprow 1993, p. 62). Critic Jeff Kelley believes that Kaprow’s endeavor was to overthrow what he saw as the unilateral communicative function of art, in which communication tends to flow in one direction, from the artist through a medium towards an audience, about the artist’s creative experience. Kaprow’s desire was for a reciprocal flow and reciprocity in art, more participatory and verb-like than noun-like (Kaprow 1993, pp. xvii – xviii). 4 As a contemporary artist of his time, Kaprow was not intending to usurp recent modern art with “better art”, but rather was attempting to reshape what art might be (Kaprow 1993, p. 82).

Duchamp and Kaprow’s provocations about what art might be, and their engagement of play and the everyday to produce participatory experiences, make them two clear precursors to my field of contemporary practice, which I refer to as socially engaged live art.

**Live Art**

Live Art is a particularly British term emerging in the late 20th Century, used to describe practices wherein there is an immediate and interactive presence shared between the artist and the public, and the reception of the artwork itself can often

---

4 Kelley concedes that any artwork, “no matter how conventional, is “experienced” by its audience, and that such experience, which involves interpretation, constitutes a form of participation. But that’s stretching common sense” (Kaprow 1993, pp. xvii–xviii).
be an incredibly elusive experience (Heathfield 2004, p. 9). The Live Art Development Agency, a London-based arts organisation, advocates the term to contextualise the work of practitioners that propose new artistic models and languages for “the representation of ideas and identities, and new strategies for intervening in the public sphere” (Live Art Development Agency n.d). UK artist Joshua Sofaer suggests that to “talk about Live Art is to talk about art that invests in ideas of process, presence and experience as much as the production of objects or things; art that wants to test the limits of the possible and the permissible; and art that seeks to be alert and responsive to its contexts, sites and audiences” (Sofaer 2002).

In Australia, the collective Field Theory is notable for making and supporting projects that can be considered representative of the local live art field. In a publication celebrating and reflecting upon their ten years together, Field Theory note that the unique artistic community who make the “in-between art” that constitutes this field is central to the existence of this field. The legacy of the history of this field is a shared and shifting story (Field Theory 2019, pp. 11-12). Indeed, it is my community of peers, in Field Theory and beyond, that contextualise and continue to inspire my own work and research in this field.

Whilst there is an arguable absence of direct antecedents in terms of art and support groups in the field, there is a rich ecology of contemporary practitioners with clear connections to the modalities and pedagogical aesthetics inherent in Ignoramus Anonymous, particularly those who play with social forms as a way of producing socially engaged live art projects. In considering how best to represent...
a field that it is made up of projects that privilege ‘liveness’ and ‘sociability’, and often take issue with the idea of ‘documentation’, here are a series of textual vignettes that attempt to capture a sense of the field.\(^7\)

Lucas Ihlein conducts an environmental audit of the exhibition *In the Balance: Art for a Changing World* at the MCA in Sydney (*Environmental Audit*, 2010)

Sarah Rodigari relocates from Melbourne to Sydney by walking the eight-hundred and eighty kilometre journey (*Strategies for Leaving and Arriving Home*, 2011)

Brian Fuata sends text messages and emails to select members of his address book (*All Titles: The email and SMS Text Performances*, 2012-2016)

Stuart Ringholt leads ‘Naturist Tours’ of large public galleries (*Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt, 6-8pm. The artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only*, 2012)


experience of biomedicine, and analyses the scientific, therapeutic and social contexts regarding practices of Biomedical Art. A more direct antecedent can observed in Mexican artist Pedro Reyes’ *Sanatorium* (2011), a transient clinic that provides short and unexpected therapies to audiences who sign up as patients.

\(^7\) These artists may or may not think of themselves as practitioners of socially engaged live art, or of play, but they clearly demonstrate the tenets as I have described them.
Of these examples, it is the likes of Aphids, Spiers, Ringholt, Ihlein and Maling that are of particular interest for my research, because of the way an art/not-art duality is retained in the services they perform via their projects. An articulation of this duality in these practices is one of the significant contributions of this thesis, including how such a duality is attained and what exactly might be achieved in the process of such a duality when it comes to Ignoramus Anonymous in particular. As artists, we each operate in the Duchampian tradition of re-framing the everyday to make art. As a contemporary cohort of live art practitioners, we operate in the pathways created by the likes of Duchamp and Kaprow, wherein activities as diverse as eulogies, political activism, naturist tours, audits and support groups can now constitute an artistic practice for study and research.

In my research through Ignoramus Anonymous, I argue that one achievement of the project is the possibility of intellectual emancipation. Consequently, it is necessary to also place my support groups in relationship with other projects that make up Rogoff’s “educational turn”.
Pedagogical Aesthetics

For Rogoff (2008), a key moment in the artworld’s “educational turn” took place in the early 2000s. Rogoff uses the term “pedagogical aesthetics” to describe the practices of artists who explore the processes of teaching and learning. Within my field of socially engaged live art, this turn can be viewed as another chapter within the lineage that began with Duchamp’s re-framing process. Now teaching and learning were being re-framed as art.

In her essay about Ignoramus Anonymous, Jaspers notes a cursory local sample of my peers that make up this sub-field, including Lara Thoms’ The Experts Project (2010-12); Kelly Doley’s The Learning Centre (2010-12); Ian Milliss and Lucas Ihlein’s Yeomans Project (2011-2013); Tessa Zettel and Karl Khoe’s The Delirious Bakery (2011); and Teaching and Learning Cinema (Jaspers 2014). Cloudship Press and the Kandos School of Cultural Adaptation could also be added to this list, along with curator Hannah Matthews’ exhibition Shapes of Knowledge (Monash University, 2019), within which Annette Krauss’ Site for Unlearning can be seen as a European antecedent to Ignoramus Anonymous.

As Jaspers notes, the intersection of pedagogy and performance in recent contemporary art and the ways artists have sought to disrupt existing knowledge economies by generating alternative sites for information exchange has been widely discussed (Jaspers 2014). The gap in this field that I have identified via my research, a gap which I address with this thesis, involves not the way that knowledge can be produced and shared but rather how ignorance can be produced and shared. Contemplating ignorance is privileged over teaching and learning in Ignoramus Anonymous, as Jaspers observes (2014). The new understandings produced by my research through Ignoramus Anonymous are to be found in the way the project elicits a turn away from knowledge and didacticism, and towards ignorance and the unknown. This is the counterpoint Ignoramus Anonymous contributes to the field of pedagogical aesthetics.
I will continue to tease out these two new understandings throughout this exegesis: the artistic practice of *playing-with* social forms and the possibility of an *ignorant turn* in contemporary art. I will do so by continuing to refer to a selection of these artists, as well as to international touchstones such as Mammalian Diving Reflex, Rimini Protokoll and the Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge. In so doing, I continue the conversation with practitioners in the field of live art and pedagogical aesthetics via reflections on *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

**Practice Based Research**

Linda Candy notes that a “distinctive aspect of practice-based research is the interplay between making and reflecting and generating questions that are addressed, in turn, by further making, reflecting and evaluating” (Candy 2011, p. 37), and that is precisely how the turns of my research have been undertaken. Rather than uncovering, mapping and presenting empirical truths, the methodology of my research has been “an active ‘making sense’ in the world” (Harle 2015).

Throughout this process, I have continued to explore potential modes of knowing and relating through *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This is what this exegesis attempts to capture: What potential modes of knowing are present in *Ignoramus Anonymous*, as observed over the many iterations of the project? What is *really* happening in the project, and *how* is it happening? What significance might this hold within the field of socially engaged live art practice?
Figure 1: Diagram representing the intersection of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as ‘art project’, ‘research project’ and an ‘everyday experience’, in order to comprise this exegesis. Image: Laura Caesar and Malcolm Whittaker.

**Chapter Breakdown**

What this exegesis seeks to articulate is the intersection within *Ignoramus Anonymous* of the art project, non-art project and research project. These three combined make up the intellectual adventure of my thesis. I have broken that adventure down into the following chapters of this exegesis:

Chapter 1 charts the origins of *Ignoramus Anonymous* and how the meetings function. I chronicle the development of the project in relation to the story of Joseph Jacotot, introduced by Jacques Rancière in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), and argue that a similar sense of intellectual emancipation is made possible through *Ignoramus Anonymous*. I explore how the pedagogy of a support group for ignorance functions, and how it generates the potential for intellectual emancipation.
Chapter 2 focuses on a reading of *Ignoramus Anonymous* alongside the ideas of American philosopher John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934). For Dewey, the work of art is in the work that art does, by augmenting the experience of the everyday. According to Dewey, the “work of art” is a verb rather than a noun and it should not be separate from common life but rather intersect with the everyday environment. I take a closer look at the work that *Ignoramus Anonymous* does in instigating a collective turn towards ignorance, paying particular attention to the shifts between the everyday contexts and art world contexts in which the project has been presented, as well as shifts in the socio-cultural environment around the work.

Chapter 3 places *Ignoramus Anonymous* in dialogue with Nicolas Bourriaud’s idea of relational aesthetics, as well as the broader field of socially engaged art. In so doing, I critique the utopian claims of these paradigms and ask how my project might offer a new perspective in the debates between critics of relational and socially engaged practices. Through my reading of Dewey, I consider the work that *Ignoramus Anonymous* does through the “group work” dialogue of the meeting, including the idea of “intersubjective cotransference”, in which a sense of support is enacted and takes on a durational quality at the conclusion of the event. In so doing, I consider the support that *Ignoramus Anonymous* actually provides and how it might be understood beyond the art world, for example - in the field of social work.

In Chapter 4, I reflect in greater detail on how the work of *Ignoramus Anonymous* is done. I borrow from British philosopher J.L. Austin to argue that by “doing things with words” (Austin 1962); I perform the persona of an “intellectual midwife” (Bett 2010), and use this persona to frame the *Ignoramus Anonymous* experience. I argue that I ‘do things with words’ in two main ways. The first is through the “paratexts” of the project. Paratexts, according to French literary theorist Gérard Genette, constitute the transitional zone between a text and “off-text”. This zone expands the world of the text itself and shapes the audience.
experience through an initial framing of how it could be read (Genette 1987, p. 2). I then analyse the ‘doing of things with words’ that takes place within the meeting itself, in order to articulate the artistic craft behind the project.

In Chapter 5, I consider how Ignoramus Anonymous resonates within the growing field that historian Robert Proctor has termed “agnotology”. Agnotology is the study of culturally induced ignorance, a concept which emerged when Proctor realised “we are much more interested in producing knowledge than in the way society propagates ignorance” (Foucart 2011). In this chapter, I explore the contribution that Ignoramus Anonymous might be able to play in the study of the social theories of ignorance that make up agnotology.

Having discussed Ignoramus Anonymous in terms of the work it does, and how that work is done, Chapter 6 returns to the starting point of my research, to reconcile the project with that which is commonly thought to be the opposite of work: play. In this final chapter I consider the ways in which play facilitates the art-making process and pedagogy of Ignoramus Anonymous. I consider Ignoramus Anonymous through the thinking of historian Johan Huizinga, who considers play to be the process through which culture itself is created. I extend his analysis through my research via Ignoramus Anonymous by suggesting that to say “I don’t know” is to be at play. To say “I don’t know” is to make things happen through words, for example: to create the possibility of intellectual emancipation.

For Rancière, the idea of emancipation implies “that there are always several spaces in a space, several ways of occupying it, and each time the trick is knowing what sort of capacities one is setting in motion, what sort of world one is constructing” (Carnevale 2007, p. 262). As I have played with ideas throughout my research, I have explored the spaces within the space of Ignoramus Anonymous. I have explored the ways of occupying it, the capacities it sets in motion and the world it is constructing. I begin Chapter 1 by considering Rancière’s idea of emancipation, and its relationship to my creative research.
Chapter 1: An Artist’s Ignorant Turn

The genesis of Ignoramus Anonymous was an exploration of the ideas set forth in Rancière’s The Ignorant Schoolmaster (1991). The title of my thesis is likewise modelled on The Ignorant Schoolmaster, in the sense that Rancière’s text centres on what he calls the intellectual adventure of French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot.

In The Ignorant Schoolmaster, Rancière argues that intellectual emancipation begins from a mutual acknowledgement of what we do not know. In this chapter I assert, after Rancière, that the social form of the Ignoramus Anonymous support group employs a “self-sufficiency” that does not split art and life into separate spheres. It is the appearance of a form of life in which art is not art (Rancière 2002, p. 136). I argue that the support group form that I employ brings a temporary micro-community together in which intellectual emancipation is theoretically possible because it involves turning away from explication by another and turning toward self-analysis, ignorance and the unknown.

To make this argument, in this chapter I begin with an outline of the project, chronicling its inspiration from Rancière, and how the event is framed and orchestrated through a method of engagement akin to art historian and critic Grant Kester’s notion of “dialogical aesthetics” (Kester 2004). I then draw on the voices of participants of the support group as “productive irritants” (Schneider and Wright 2006) to clarify my argument and provide a body of qualitative data regarding subjective experiences of the project.

My Adventure Toward Ignorance Begins

In 2012, I was Artist-in-Residence at Waverley Council in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. This meant that I was provided a free studio space for six months, and in exchange I was required to provide a “community benefit project” that stemmed from my art practice. At the time, I was reading Rancière’s The Ignorant
Schoolmaster, which chronicles Jacotot’s astonishing discovery: that he was able to teach what he himself did not know: the Flemish language. Jacotot concluded that not only was knowledge unnecessary to teach, but explication was also unnecessary for the act of learning. Jacotot presented the students with a bilingual edition of François Fénelon’s novel Télémaque (1699), from which they learned to read, write and speak Flemish through comparing and contrasting with the French text they already understood. The results of his radical examination in pedagogy led him to announce that all people were equally intelligent, including himself and his students, and that it was only in the will to use intelligence that people differ. Jacotot referred to his philosophical methodology as “intellectual emancipation”. Rancière uses the case of the Jacotot methodology to elucidate his own position on emancipation in The Ignorant Schoolmaster, and he further extends his position in The Emancipated Spectator, in which he applies these ideas to artistic practice. Rancière speaks to my own experience of formal education and of art when he reconciles the learning student with the art viewer. He asserts that in both cases there is often a stultifying logic of straight uniform transmission. “There is a something on one side—a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind—and it must pass to the other side” (Rancière 2009, p. 14). What you must see, feel, and think, as both student and spectator, is what is communicated to you. Rancière calls for such stultification to be overthrown. He wants us to be emancipated from this power relationship.

The Jacotot story inspired me to undertake an experiment of my own. I imagined creating a school of ignorance as my community benefit project for the Waverley Council residency, akin to the “universal teaching” method developed by Jacotot.

8 A contemporary rendition of the Jacotot narrative can be observed in the 1999 Hole in the Wall project in which poor young Indian children figured out how to use a PC on their own, in a foreign language, and then taught other children. This is recounted by educational researcher Sugata Mitra in his 2007 TED Talk Kids Can Teach Themselves. For more on the project see Mitra (2007), and for a specific consideration of Mitra in relation to Jacotot and Rancière see Stamp (2013).

9 The Emancipated Spectator was originally presented, in English, at the opening of the Fifth International Summer Academy of the Arts in Frankfurt in 2004. That text appeared in Artforum in 2007 and was then slightly revised and re-published in 2009. I will refer to both versions.
In the project, a range of local people would teach a range of subjects that they did not know. My rationale was that this could be a method for discovery, because both those teaching and those learning would be unburdened by the known and prescribed, and so the results would be in flux with unknown possibilities. As a nascent idea, it was an ironic subversion of what constituted a “benefit” for the community in the first place, particularly in the wake of the critique of relational art made by Claire Bishop. In her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (2012), Bishop seeks a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of such work, rather than solely focusing on demonstrable positive social “impact” (Bishop 2012, p. 18). Rancière’s point in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is not to prove “that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be achieved under that supposition” (Ranciere 1991, p. 46). For Bishop, this means that equality is a working principle rather than a goal. Equality is continually verified by being put into practice (Bishop 2012, p. 266). Exploring such a supposition and its verification through practice was to become the centre of my nascent project.

What subjects would actually be “taught” at this school of ignorance? How would “lessons” then be run? Jacotot’s methodology is primarily a philosophical one, and without an established “technique” that is now used to teach languages. Consequently, there is no real template on which I could model my idea of a school. There was also so much about which I was personally ignorant of that I was not sure where to begin. In a brief survey of locals, there seemed to be a degree of difficulty for everyone in discussing what they did not know, and how their particular ignorance might be harnessed for “lessons”. The difficulties in this process of discussing ignorance with the local community stimulated the evolution of the project into what it was destined to become. That evolution was based on the way in which these difficulties exposed what might be a genuine need for the community: a space to discuss ignorance itself.
The focus of the project consequently shifted and became a support group for the overwhelming lack of knowledge that everyone grapples with (or hides from) on a daily basis. My interest morphed into using the story of Jacotot as a provocation to explore what might happen if explication is removed from a learning process that is predicated on the unilateral transmission of information from master to student. How might such a removal of explication result in intellectual emancipation?

My provocation for the support groups was that when something is encountered in life that is not understood then it should be questioned. If an individual does not question their ignorance then they are hiding from it, even with gracious acceptance. The support group was to be a space to admit our ignorance by tapping into child-like questioning, a performance that seeks to encourage a transformative turn toward the unknown and unknowing. This shift that the work took was the first emancipatory turn of the project, because it meant that the work was now a conversation between “equals” rather than involving the power structure of a presiding “school teacher” figure. This is what emancipation means for Rancière: “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (Rancière 2009, 19). Because a support group space lacked the power structure of such a boundary, I intuited that it was charged with possibilities beyond those of a conventional educational space, which having a teacher would suggest.

As the work manifested, I continued to examine how this might or might not be the case. I noticed, for example, that a support group for ignorance might embody such an idea of emancipation because the unanswerable questions raised through the meeting devolved pre-existing intellectual authorities and assumed logics, and that the collective body of a micro-community could form in their place. In these temporary micro-communities, a sense of equality could be observed in our ignorance. This is not to say that I was developing a utopic state with an assessable efficacy. However, through Rancière’s thinking on education and emancipation, Ignoramus Anonymous became an embodied experiment to explore what might be
achieved under the supposition that collectively turning toward what we don’t know can create a sense of equality. For Rancière, “equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified” (Rancière 1991, 137). Through creating a support group for ignorance I was researching how this claim might be verified.

When it came time to deliver my “community benefit” project, I held a support group for ignorance in a side room of the Waverley Council Library. I titled the project Ignoramus Anonymous, after Alcoholics Anonymous, and billed it as “a support group for the ignorant, i.e. for anyone and everyone.” In attendance were a handful of community members, council staff, and art world colleagues. On arrival, I welcomed each person, offered them wine and hors d’oeuvres, and encouraged them to take a seat in a circle of chairs I had arranged in advance. When it was time to begin I asked the group to share confessions of their ignorance.

The result was rather ironic and forced, and no one really wanted to join in. It did not help that there was a “know-it-all” in the group who put people off by lecturing those who did offer examples of their ignorance. In the words of another participant he became a “bad character” and upon reflection I could have gently reeled him in to explain that this was not a space for didacticism but a place for support, and his condescension was entirely unsupportive. I did continue to encourage him to share his own ignorance throughout the event, but he was not willing to do so, and such a position became common in a number of later meetings. What makes the actions of such individuals into “bad characters” in the group is that they assert themselves into a role of master-explicator, which as

Curator and critic Nicolas Bourriaud feels that this kind of work creates what he calls “microtopias”, “small enclaves carrying the possibility of freedom” (O’Donnell 2006, p. 30). I will discuss Bourriaud and microtopias further when I turn to a critical discussion of relational aesthetics in Chapter 3.

For a flyer used to invite participants to the event, please refer to page 10 of the appendix.

Throughout this exegesis I will make a series of considerations of the idea of irony that is inherent in Ignoramus Anonymous. In so doing, I take irony to be the expression of meaning through what might typically signify the opposite, that this expression is used for humorous or emphatic effect, and that the antonym for irony is sincerity (Oxford Dictionary 2019).
Rancière says “stultifies by telling [others] that they can’t learn without him” (Rancière 1991, p. 28). Explication is not called for nor wanted at Ignoramus Anonymous. When explication does happen, the hierarchy that we are turning away from becomes palpable and it can fracture the group’s emergent sense of community.

The feedback from this community benefit project presentation, which was essentially a prototype of the work, was that I had tried a little too hard to get people to dive right in and talk about their ignorance. It was felt that the unease from this beginning persisted throughout the meeting. Apart from this criticism, feedback was promising, and there was a consensus from participants that genuine benefits could be envisioned from such an event in the future. Some of the benefits considered included the creative and critical faculties that the “think-space” inspired, talking through alternate perspectives on life, hubristic flaws as entertainment to learn from, and even the provision of free group therapy. In debriefing, I recognised the “art of conversation” necessary in the craft of the performance of my role, and a need to facilitate in a more subtle and hands-off fashion. Such facilitation corresponds with Rancière’s desire for art to “tear itself away from the territory of aestheticised life” (Rancière 2002, p. 147). To tear art away from the territory of aestheticised life is to find an art/not-art duality in the experience of the work. An experience, for Rancière, is aesthetic, “insofar as it is not, or at least not only, art” (Rancière 2010, p. 116).

To tear the art of Ignoramus Anonymous away from aestheticised life and more subtly facilitate, I concluded that I must attempt to ‘disappear’ as the artist behind the project and become one with/of the support group. I further thought that it might also be worthwhile to consider the disappearance of the ‘art project’ of

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13 Such stultification can also be observed at the heart of the problem recently coined as ‘mainsplaining’, wherein men condescend to women by assuming they are more knowledgeable.
14 This feedback from participants on possible benefits envisioned from the project was the introduction of the problematic idea of efficacy into my research, leading to the reflections on the possible outcomes of Ignoramus Anonymous that this exegesis seeks to explore.
*Ignoramus Anonymous* and for the support group to become one with/of everyday life. My thinking was that this might achieve the Rancièrian duality of art/not-art within the context of *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

**The Artist as Context Creator**

Some months passed after the presentation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* at Waverley Library, and then the Australia Council for the Arts launched a new program to fund artist residencies at organisations where artist residency programs were not yet in place. The short-lived program sounded similar to an initiative in the UK led by artist couple Barbara Steveni and John Latham in the 1960s, the Artist Placement Group (APG):

> The [APG] was premised on the idea that art has a useful contribution to make to the world, and that artists can serve society—not by making works of art, but through their verbal interactions in the context of institutions and organisations. To this end [APG] organised placements or residencies for British artists in a range of private corporations and public bodies (Bishop 2012, p. 164).

The APG’s slogan was “the context is half the work,” and it operated on the principle of pushing the artist out into society (Bishop 2012, p. 166). Like the Australia Council’s initiative, the APG was interested not only in the production of artwork as an outcome, but also in reciprocal exchange, and learning and development from both parties. I managed to acquire one of these grants, making me artist in residence at the State Library of New South Wales, and I chose to use the residency to continue developing *Ignoramus Anonymous*. In the process, I came to realise that context is half the work for me as well. Grant Kester describes artists who employ a performative process-based approach as “context providers” rather than “content providers” (Kester 2004, p. 1). Like many such artists, my practice involves the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations, often beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum, in
which the focus is on providing context rather than content (Kester 2004, p. 1).

The context of Ignoramus Anonymous facilitates analysis and verification, much like the context of Jacotot’s pedagogical method, in which no pre-determined “content” is transferred from teacher to student either.

The first context for Ignoramus Anonymous is in the situating of the meeting in a site outside the confines of an art institution. I thought of the library as a perfect location for the work, where it would not be seen primarily as ‘art’ but more as an everyday ‘event’ in a public program. The second context for Ignoramus Anonymous is in the orchestration of the meeting itself. For this context of dialogical aesthetics, Kester suggests an image of the artist “defined in terms of openness, of listening . . . and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator” (Kester 2004, p. 110). This is what I attempted to harness within the meeting itself. To do so, I came to the idea of initiating each meeting with some guided meditation. I wrote a meditation text that encouraged reflection on how little it was possible to know in life. I inserted honest examples of my own ignorance, and the text became demonstrative of how the project functioned. The participants were able to model their behavior on mine, without requiring direct instruction. Through the meditation text, I was able to establish the performance from within the performance, without outlining rules nor needing to encourage participants, and without overtly framing the performance as ‘art’. By not naming it ‘art’, there was no division between the perception of Ignoramus Anonymous as an art-project or support group. It became both.

Kester borrows the term “context provider” from British artist Peter Dunn. In 1991, Dunn founded the visual arts organisation The Art of Change with his partner Loraine Leeson. “The artistic identity of The Art of Change is based in part on their capacity to listen and to maximise the collective creative potential of the group they work with” (Pollard 2005). In this way, they developed collaborative projects with community groups, schools, women’s organisations, and other constituencies in the Docklands and East London (Kester 2004, p. 22).

Both the State Library of New South Wales and Waverley Library, where Ignoramus Anonymous was held as monthly meetings across 2013 and 2014, had ongoing public programs into which the project fitted.
At The State Library of NSW, *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings now began with my welcoming of individuals as they trickled in at the advised start time, prompted to attend by advertisements for “Ignoramus Anonymous, a support group for ignorance”. I would memorise each person’s name as I met them on arrival, offer them a glass of wine and encourage them to take a seat in a circle of chairs. I would bring the meeting to a start by saying how good it was to see everyone there. I would go around the circle greeting everyone by name. I would then explain that the event begins with some guided meditation. I would suggest that it is best done with eyes closed, if agreeable, and then I would proceed with the meditation text.

At the conclusion of the meditation, there was often a pause as those present would open their eyes and look around the circle, waiting for someone else to speak and reveal their own ignorance first. I would wait too, only intervening if someone looked like they had something they wanted to say but needed a little encouragement. Someone always had something to share and would do so after this initial moment passed. From this point on the meeting would unfold, over the course of an hour, as something akin to what media critic and artist Gail Priest referred to as an “analogue Google machine” (Priest 2014). As an analogy, *Ignoramus Anonymous* positions the support group circle as a DIY search engine that resituates the knowledge/ignorance and understandings/misunderstandings of those present as the content of the work. However, I would contend that this analogy is slightly off the mark. “Googling” is about filling in gaps in knowledge and understanding, whereas *Ignoramus Anonymous* is about recognising, accepting and sitting with ignorance. It is not a place for teaching; it is a space for support. It is a space for wondering rather than answering. After each question is

17 Given the project title, the irony of naming names, at both the support group meetings and within this exegesis, is not lost on me. In Chapter 4, I will explore the way that titling the project *Ignoramus Anonymous* is part of my craft of “doing things with words” in order to create the world of a support group for ignorance. As I will discuss throughout this exegesis, the project is predicated on a consistent tension between irony and sincerity.

18 For an example of this meditation text, please refer to page 34 of the appendix.

19 Having said this, in Chapter 4 I will discuss the machine-like quality that *Ignoramus Anonymous* conversations take on as a "post-digital search-engine".
raised at the meeting, a conversation unfolds on that subject until the next admission of ignorance is raised. In this way the meeting exposes how knowledge and understanding are more lacking than first thought (particularly when we are cut off from the Internet). At *Ignoramus Anonymous*, we reconfigure our typical relationship with knowledge and understanding, which is frequently a relationship of passive consumption of a superior master source. As Rancière points out, “the student is emancipated if he is obliged to use his own intelligence” (Rancière 1991, p. 15), and at *Ignoramus Anonymous* attendees willingly agree to this temporary contract.

**An Adventure With Others**

I have engaged in a process of continual dialogical feedback with participants as part of my *Ignoramus Anonymous* research, in order to understand the nature of the experience for attendees. The thoughts and observations from these participants have been shared via face-to-face interviews, email correspondence, and a short essay on the project written by Anneke Jaspers. In some cases, passing anecdotes acted as triggers for further investigation on my part; such has been the nature of my research methodology. I have used participant feedback to try to understand what these preconditions might be. The large majority of participant feedback is drawn from individuals who attended multiple meetings over an extended period of time, and their reflections on the work took place over months.

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20 It is requested that smartphones are not used during the meetings.
21 All feedback and anecdotes in this exegesis are attributed to the real name of the person I am quoting; except in rare cases where participants desired their names to be withheld, or where I wrote something down that was said during or after a meeting but did not note the name of the participant. All in-text citations refer to emails received from participants approving their contributions to my exegesis. These participants are aware of the way in which their comments appear in this exegesis and all due permission has been granted, in accordance with the University of Wollongong’s Human Research Ethics Committee. In some cases this approval has been retrospectively granted. Consequently, there is a discrepancy between dates cited for quotes in this exegesis and the dates cited for those same quotes in the journal article *An Artist’s Ignorant Turn* (Whittaker 2016a) and conference paper *The Work of Facilitating and Supporting an Experience of Ignorance* (Whittaker 2016b), which have been included on page 51 and page 67 of the appendix respectively. Two transcripts from face-to-face interviews have also been included in the appendix, on page 87 and 102.
and even years of returned involvement in the project.

A key challenge in shaping the project as research is the difficulty of measuring the impact of the Ignoramus Anonymous experience for participants. The transformative impact of the meetings is no doubt contingent on context, number of sessions attended, where the sessions took place, who else attended the session, the day of the week, the time of day, and the intangible ambiance of the moment. What this suggests is that there are certain preconditions that create the optimum engagement for the work in which my research is most effective. Based on my observations of running the project over the extended period of time of my research, I believe that a participant taking part in a one-off meeting encounters a disruption regarding how they present and protect their ideal selves. In turn, this disruption provokes self-reflection in the embarrassing admissions they tend to share, and leads to an intimate connection with the group. A sense of resilience manifests in this intimate connection that forms, as the group becomes vulnerable and playful together. However, these disruptions and self-reflections, along with the feelings of intimacy and resilience in the community that forms, are, of course, momentary. A participant attending a singular meeting receives an initial provocation of what the project has to offer. It is my observation that on-going immersion in the project is required for optimum engagement, which is most effectively offered when the project is staged in the form of monthly meetings, wherein sustained engagement and commitment can be achieved in on-going participation. Consequently, from here on in this exegesis I have chosen to only include feedback from attendees of multiple support groups over an extended period of time. This is not to suggest that a one-off attendance offers no impact, as it is evident from my observations and anecdotal feedback offered by one-off participants that there is certainly an effect on the participant from attending just a singular meeting. Rather, it is to suggest that there are different impacts based on different levels of inclusion in the project, and the project flexibly accommodates these different levels that participants are interested in or able to commit. To participate in one meeting, as many did, is to experience a work of
participatory theatre in the form of a support group, which results in the momentary disruption I have described. In repeated attendance, the support group form is actualised for participants. By actualised, I mean that the idea of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as a support group becomes a reality. I have observed that cumulative participation plays a significant part in this process because it immerses participants in the machinations of the support group, revealing the work to be more than the representational performance of a support group. Furthermore, I have observed that cumulative participation tends to galvanise a community of ‘regulars’ to the support group meetings, and give the group a sense of ownership over the event and the support they show one another. Regulars become familiar with how *Ignoramus Anonymous* functions and they run the meetings with me. They often even explain how the meetings work to new attendees, and police the rules of the meetings to them.

Advocating for on-going immersion in the project is not to suggest that the impacts of *Ignoramus Anonymous* cannot be felt after a single session. Indeed, I assert that a temporary micro-community forms at each meeting to support one another, and this is true even if it is the only single session that an *Ignoramus Anonymous* participant attends.

Allowing the project to flexibly accommodate different levels of participation is attuned to the dramaturgy of many practices of therapy and social work, wherein an increased demand for accessibility to services accompanied by diminished resources to provide them has resulted in practitioners innovating and devising new programs and service delivery strategies. As a result, the way mental health service providers practice on a daily basis has significantly altered in many hospital, community, and private practice sessions. The notion that interventions must be long and laborious to promote enduring change in clients has been challenged and altered. The literature shows evidence of the remarkable effectiveness of brief interventions. Consequently, time unlimited interventions have increasingly given way to more finite interventions. The most extreme case of
brief intervention is a single, self-contained session of therapy (Silve, McElheran and Lawson 2008). Ignoramus Anonymous is attuned to these new outlooks on ‘single session therapy’, wherein the responsibility for impact shifts from the expertise of the therapist to ‘mend’ the participant, towards empowering the participant to solve their own problems as necessary (Campbell 2012). Ignoramus Anonymous acts as a ‘drop in’ support group for ignorance, accommodating the attendance of participants as they feel necessary. The literature on ‘single session therapy’ allows the argument to be made that my utilisation of the dramaturgy of social work and therapy practices to structure Ignoramus Anonymous meetings, means that they can have an impact regardless of how many sessions a participant attends. I will continue to discuss how I actualised this support group form throughout this exegesis, including how I established the conditions by which optimum participation can best be activated in the work. In Chapter 6, I will suggest that an artist such as myself can use play to most effectively establish conditions by which optimum participation is activated in a work like Ignoramus Anonymous. In the meantime, I will turn now to observations from participants on how they understood the support group form to be initially reconfigured for the project.

Reconfiguring the Form

The reconfiguring of the support group form and the initial turn toward ignorance begins with the meditation text that I read out at the commencement of each Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. Jaspers refers to this opening as a monologue that “operates as an allegory for the work at large, self-consciously representing its entanglement of play and serious enquiry,” after which my “hand in the remainder of the sessions is unobtrusive” (Jaspers 2014). Indeed, theatre-maker and writer Mark Rogers notes that after this opening the meetings tended to follow a pattern of:
1. Someone revealing their ignorance.
2. Someone else informing them or speculating an answer to the lacked knowledge.
3. The group deciding this practice of “filling in the gap in knowledge” to be not in the spirit of the session and then proceeding without too much more correcting or informing etc. (Rogers 2019).

Rogers’ suggestion of this “spirit” of the session highlights the disappearance of myself as the artist, a disappearance also recognised by dramaturge Jennifer Medway, who notes that I wasn’t “positioned as an authority from the moment the questioning started and instead became another participant” (Medway 2019). Medway considers that the support group formula has a beginning but not necessarily an ending, and that this is important: “It’s a form that has no final requirement (no required denouement/climax/third act/required resolution of a conflict)” (Medway 2019). Consequently, the artist’s voice is no longer central once the meeting has been begun. I put this thought from Medway to the test and on occasion would momentarily excuse myself from a meeting to see what would happen. In each instance I would return to the meeting to find it had continued in my absence. This aligns with Rancière’s assertion that “the circle of emancipation must be begun” (Rancière 1991, 16) in that I am calling the meeting to order. In so doing, I am drawing the possibility of the circle of emancipation through the quite literal support group circle. It need not necessarily be me that calls the meeting to order either. On a couple of occasions I have had colleagues run Ignoramus Anonymous on my behalf.22 One of these colleagues reported back that some attendees of the meetings she ran were expecting my presence and others were not. In either case, it seems that it ultimately didn’t matter whether I was there or not, provided that someone was there to open the circle and commence the meeting.

22 Artist Ryan McGoldrick ran meetings at Bondi Pavilion Gallery in 2015, and artist Christie Woodhouse ran meetings in the library at Frontyard Project Space and Thirroul Community Centre in 2017. McGoldrick wrote an account of his experience running meetings and this has been included on page 44 of the appendix.
Fiction

For Rogers, there is a feeling of a sense of a script or behavioural code embedded in the social form of the support group. He suggests that perhaps “it is this minimal level of ‘playing along’ that allows the group to be so open with each other . . . using the ‘fiction’ to arrive at the actual feeling of connection” (Rogers 2019). Here, Rogers’ use of the term “fiction” can be read as the representation of a support group that proves real through the community it forms, through a Rancièrian art and not-art tension held in place through the fiction. For Rancière, fiction is not a term that “designates the imaginary from the real; it involves a re-framing of the ‘real’ . . . building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (Rancière 2010, p. 141), and I believe this to be the fiction of Ignoramus Anonymous.

There is a distinction between those who may have perceived the project as a participatory performance, and those who experienced the project as a legitimate support group. Medway wondered whether she differed from the rest of the group because she came primed with knowledge of my past artworks, and an awareness of the artistic frame of the project, whereas some of the others may have attended an “actual” support group meeting (Medway 2019). Medway also wondered if she retained perceived hierarchies around class, level of education, and the mental health of others present at the meetings she attended. She wrote to me of one meeting in particular:

There was a guy there who was for all intents and purposes a bigoted man, but who may also have been coping with a mental illness...What started as a tirade against Muslims became accounts of having seen angels and having been told information by voices no one else could hear. This was combined with a woman who...was there for an argument, there to be open with her

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23 This is in contrast to Medway’s aforementioned view of me as no longer an authority within the project. In the space of the performance, I was not an authority to Medway, but she thought of herself as an authority.
opinions and thoughts and who challenged this man quite readily. It was clear that neither of them had come to a performance...they were all there and committed as attendees of a support group for ignorance. This conversation went on without mediation from you. At no point did you become an authority and break the understanding of us all being on the same level. In fact, it only ended when the man left, which was a very relieving moment for us all (Medway 2019).

Medway had the inclination that she retained perceived hierarchies seemingly because of her awareness of the performance frame. Regardless, both she and Rogers agreed that a certain “leveling of a playing field” was made through the ignorant turn of the meeting (Medway, 2019; Rogers, 2019).

Such is the tension that is at play in the meetings that it is impossible to reconcile the project as either wholly “performance” or “support group”. It is also impossible to assess the actual emancipation and transformation attained through the project. Artist Christie Woodhouse wrote of the “glimpse of potential of emancipation” she experienced in the project and the feeling of an “invitation and gentle support” to go further if one wished (Woodhouse 2019). It this potential in the project that I am writing of here and that Rancière wrote of in The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Both are about the creation of contexts for what is potential.

**Bubbles of Ignorance**

That potential was found for artist Jane Grimley through the opening meditation, which she felt guided her, as she put it, “into a safe place of ignorance with strangers”. Grimley writes, “it felt enough like a playful game that I was ready to be

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24 Both Rogers and Medway used the analogy of the leveling of a playing field.
25 In this chapter, I focus just on the library presentations of the project, for which the project was originally made. The important tension between art and non-art is retained within a library because, as mentioned in Berrebi (2008), “art has not been attributed a specific place” in such a context. In Chapter 2, I will compare what happens when Ignoramus Anonymous meetings are held within artworld settings.
irreverent with my own ignorance and that of others” (Grimley 2019). Grimley, the most frequent attender of all Ignoramus Anonymous meetings, “started to consider all meditations as some sweet acceptance of the empty vessel” that she felt individuals ultimately were. Such an expression corresponds with thoughts that arose for me throughout the project: that we are all equally ignorant of the infinite amount of what there is to know. Consider this notion as represented in the diagram below:

![Diagram](image.png)

**Figure 2:** Diagram representing the sphere of the known, surrounded by the infinite unknown. Image: Laura Caesar and Malcolm Whittaker.

Some people may feel like they know more than others, or they might actually know more, or what they know might possess more cultural value or cachet and provide them with a higher paying or more lucrative job. And yet, we are all ignorant. Our ignorance surrounds us. We each live in a bubble of belief, familiarity and specialisation, a bubble of what we know.

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26 Grimley wrote: “I liked using them [the meetings] as places to bring dates. I wanted to learn about how my dates thought. Which ideas and people attracted them in the group, and what they might offer as their own ignorance. I wanted to see if they liked to think in interesting patterns. I liked showing off my ignorance too” (Grimley 2019).
Consider this bubble as a sphere, with an individual at the centre. The sphere can grow, when, for example, swing-dancing classes are taken, or where the location of a country on a map is learned, or when one becomes aware of certain machinations of how their place of employment works. The sphere of the known is increasing. The sphere might even grow to be bigger than the spheres of others. The size of these spheres becomes a hierarchy, particularly in how the content is valued by other people in other spheres. One primary evaluation of the content of a sphere is what can earn the most money or provide the most power, but there are also specialisations that are often only relevant within a specific community.27 Take swing dancing, for example. If an individual has swing dancing in their sphere of the known, then that has a particular value in a particular community. In that community they are a “good dancer” and superior to others, but it might not necessarily translate outside that community.

On a daily basis, each of us turns away from the ignorance that is outside our spheres of knowledge. We do this to save face, to avoid embarrassment and conflict (both internal and external), and to retain the sense of identity that we have founded on what we believe we know. Cosmologist Carl Sagan gives an example of this in his introduction to theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (1988), where he notes that it is only children who do not know enough to avoid stopping to ask really clever questions (Hawking 1988, ix). One such question might be: “Why does time move forward and not backward?” Adults on the receiving end of this question are most likely confronted with their own lack of understanding of a fundamental law that governs life as we know it.

Still, the adult probably *does* know more and does occupy a larger sphere than the child. Here is another diagram, which we could say represents that parent, with

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27 Psychology researcher Michael J. Smithson notes that specialisation is also a social ignorance arrangement, because it arises precisely when it is believed that there is too much for a single person to learn everything (Smithson 2008, p. 221). As a by-product of specialisation, individuals can choose to remain willfully ignorant, knowing that they can turn to a specialist when necessary. For an example of this, please refer to page 135 of the appendix.
the earlier diagram representing the child:

Figure 3: Diagram representing a slightly larger sphere of the known, still surrounded by the infinite unknown. Image: Laura Caesar and Malcolm Whittaker.

Regardless of how large the sphere of an individual is, outside that sphere the unknowns are still infinite. For Martin A. Schwartz, a professor of medicine and biomedical engineering, this is a crucial lesson: the scope of things unknown isn’t merely vast; it is, for all practical purposes, infinite (Schwartz 2008). In relation to the unknown outside the finitude of the sphere, there is an equality in how little everyone knows in the bigger scheme of things. A collective turn toward ignorance then, which lies in every direction if only we open our eyes and take notice, is an emancipatory one. It collapses both those hierarchies and the social contexts that
inform them. A person might know how to save lives, but does he know how to Charleston? Another individual might know how to trade on the stock market, but does she know how to submit a research paper to a peer-reviewed journal? What is the validity of this knowledge in the first place? How do we know what we know, how do we know it is true, and what is its value? Schwartz argues that focusing on questions to which you don’t know the answer puts you in the awkward situation of appearing ignorant, and that “productive stupidity” means making a choice to be ignorant, i.e. choosing to turn toward the unknown and ask a question. He recognises that no doubt reasonable levels of confidence and emotional resilience help to ease this transition from learning what other people once discovered to making your own discoveries. The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries (Schwartz 2008).

It is my suggestion that Ignoramus Anonymous creates this convivial resilience, potentially leading toward transformative discoveries.

Over the course of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, our spheres of the known fluctuate in size. Beyond the generally convivial banter that forms the first layer of the work a sincere self-reflexivity is prompted not only during the event but also afterwards (Jaspers 2014). Jaspers notes that “the realisation of some things that we don’t know, or half know, or thought we knew - and how these implicitly reflect certain attitudes and biases - can be acutely unsettling as well as genuinely transformative” (Jaspers 2014). This transformative turn, allowing participants to take note of their ignorance, means that their spheres of knowledge also grow, as unknown unknowns become known unknowns.

Whilst ignorance and stupidity might hold slightly different connotations for the reader, I am taking both words to synonymously mean having a lack of knowledge. The same shared definitions will apply when I use the word stupid again on page 65.

On this durational character, Woodhouse recalls “when leaving the room, the conversation went on in my head as I thought of many other things that I was ignorant of or could have brought up, that weren’t triggered at the time” (Woodhouse 2017).
New Knowledge from New Contexts

New knowledge comes about by pushing at the unknown (or at least accidently dipping your toe in it), and that is often unsettling (or surprising) on some level. On the surface of each of the spheres that we occupy is where the known meets the unknown, where knowledge forms and learning happens. Turning toward what is outside the sphere and relating it to what is inside: this is the form of pedagogy that Rancière writes about. This pedagogy comes not from looking toward what is already known by others, but from what is unknown in oneself and from what is happening on the surface of our spheres.

Making this turn through the performance of a support group for ignorance means operating at the dual horizon Bishop observes necessary, of facing toward art and the social field, “testing and revising the criteria we give to both domains in a double finality that avoids the work becoming ‘edu-tainment’ or ‘pedagogical aesthetics’” (Bishop 2012, p. 274). Ignoramus Anonymous involves the social process that Roland Barthes suggests of most effective education, not of teacher to taught but of those taught to each other (Bishop 2012, p. 274). Ignoramus Anonymous brings these relations into play through the considered choreography of a simple multi-participant conversation that crystallises a sense of emancipation.

There are echoes of Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire in Barthes’s thoughts on the social process of relations within effective education, in that it is carried on by “A” not for or about but with “B” (Freire 1970, p. 74).30 “Only dialogue, which requires critical thinking, is also capable of generating critical thinking. Without dialogue there is no communication, and without

30 Bishop points out that Rancière omits from The Ignorant Schoolmaster the emergence of the critical pedagogy of the 1960s by the likes of Freire, despite the fact that Freire’s seminal work similarly champions the empowerment of learning subjects. She notes: “Unlike Rancière, it is significant that Freire maintains that hierarchy can never be entirely erased” (Bishop 2012, p. 266).
communication there can be no true education” (Freire 1970, pp. 73-74). Freire’s critique of the mere consumption of knowledge, and the necessity of critical thinking to overcome ignorance, is described in his foundational text *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970). He refers to such consumption as the “banking” model of education, in which a teacher “deposits” knowledge into the student. For Freire, this reinforces subjugation and oppression in the learning individual, rather than inspiring awareness of their position as a historical subject capable of producing change.

Since Freire’s foundational work of the 1960s, there are now a range of contemporary practitioners and thinkers focused on intellectual emancipation as a form of pedagogy, who focus on emancipation via dialogue. The “Flipped Classroom” is one example of such a practice. It was first described in 2000 and involves inverting “the time and place of homework and instruction, allowing students more time for collaboration and engagement in constructivist learning environments” (Turen & Goktas 2016, p. 52). “Public Pedagogy” is another reasonably new area of educational scholarship “that considers the application and development of educational theory beyond formal schooling” (Ravenscroft 2017). The aim of Public Pedagogy is to analyse the learning that takes place outside of typical school environments and in contexts such as cultural education, public space, popular culture and political struggle (Ravenscroft 2017). It is within these traditions of pedagogical research that I situate my own research with *Ignoramus Anonymous*, as well as within the field of socially engaged live art practice. I shall discuss this field of art practice in more detail throughout this exegesis. In so doing, I explore the noticeable overlap of shared interests in conversational and contextual forms for both socially engaged artists and contemporary pedagogical research in the wake of Freire.

Indeed, creating the context for reflective conversations has been a central method for both my research and the *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings. I have continually conducted reflective conversations about *Ignoramus Anonymous* outside of
Ignoramus Anonymous meetings. The ideas of pedagogy discussed in this chapter were latent in the project from the beginning, but have been uncovered and articulated through my research process. When I began, I was using the word ‘conceit’ to describe the support groups for ignorance I was running. I can trace my shift in such thinking to another conversation early on in my research process.

Conclusion: More Than Conceit

In a conversation I had with Jaspers at the conclusion of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting she attended at the State Library of New South Wales in 2014, I referred to the social form of the support group as the “conceit” of my project. I meant that it was my artistic device for facilitating what I have described here as an ignorant turn. Jaspers disputed the word, feeling that it tended toward fictional and metaphoric allusions of the function of the work and away from the genuine support group that the performance was, and genuine support it enacted (Jaspers 2019).

In this chapter, I have taken Ignoramus Anonymous beyond being a metaphoric conceit for the exploration of Rancière’s theories on intellectual emancipation, and into the realm of a genuine pedagogical support group that uses conversation to elicit a turn toward and a discovery of that which we hardly pay attention: our ignorance. In the process of eliciting this turn, Ignoramus Anonymous is a context for the potential intellectual emancipation of participants. Jacotot created a context for intellectual emancipation by removing explication from his teaching, because explication by a knowing master would have been “the annihilation of one mind by another” (Rancière 1991, p. 32). Likewise, in providing the context of a support group avoiding explication, a temporary micro-

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31 One such conversation that falls outside the scope of this exegesis was with Jade Kennedy, ‘Indigenous Projects Officer’ and ‘Academic Developer of Indigenous Knowledges’ at University of Wollongong. In conversation with Kennedy I found striking connections between what I advocate through Ignoramus Anonymous and what Kennedy suggests is a methodology for embedding Indigenous knowledges within pedagogical practices: the recognition of one’s own ignorance. I have included a transcript of that conversation on page 102 of the appendix.

32 Whilst this conversation with Jaspers took place in 2014, her retrospective permission was granted in 2019. See footnote 17 for an explanation regarding these occasional discrepancies in this exegesis and the appendix.
community is formed in which intellectual emancipation is made possible.

This conversation with Jaspers triggered my reflection on the function of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as a legitimate support group. This reflection then gave rise to further investigation, namely: if the work functions to enact support as pedagogy through a collective turn towards ignorance, then how exactly is that work done by me as an artist? What is the craft behind the work? My next line of enquiry was to focus not on the outcomes of the work but on how the work *functions*. In the following chapters I will turn towards further consideration of the performance of the work, but I will shift to a focus on the “work of art” as a verb rather than a noun.
Chapter 2: Different Environments, Different Experiences?

In the previous chapter, I argued that an ignorant turn in contemporary art could bring about the possibility of a form of intellectual emancipation. Inherent in this assertion is that when it comes to Ignoramus Anonymous, what constitutes the work of art is the work that the art does: the possibility of intellectual emancipation through the experience of the context that the artwork creates. What I skirted in the previous chapter was the presentation and experience of the project beyond the library context in which the project began. The initial focus of this chapter is the shift between the library and art world contexts for the project, reconciling the possibility of different work done by the project in different environments. The artworld focus will be on the presentation of Ignoramus Anonymous at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA), and I will include voices from the curators of that iteration of the project. This will generate a discussion regarding the “efficacy” of Ignoramus Anonymous. In other words: what work does the project do, including and beyond the idea of intellectual emancipation? This discussion will place a reading of the facilitation of Ignoramus Anonymous alongside the ideas of American philosopher John Dewey in Art as Experience (1934). For Dewey, the work of art is the work that art does, in augmenting the experience of the everyday. I take a closer look at the work that Ignoramus Anonymous does in instigating a collective turn towards ignorance, paying attention to the shifts between the physical environments of the everyday and artworld locations in which the project has been presented, as well as the forever-changing socio-cultural environment around the support group meetings. I argue that through the framing of Ignoramus Anonymous within the everyday library and community centre environments, ‘art’ is simultaneously ‘not art’. In doing this I seek to create a new practice-based understanding of such duality, expanding Rancière’s concept of the “aesthetic regime of art”.

Art as Experience

Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934) contains what can be interpreted as a call for the work of art to be thought of as a verb rather than a noun. As a verb, for Dewey the work of art is the work that art does to enhance an everyday lived experience of life, outside the compartmentalisation of the gallery context. For Dewey, the gallery is where “art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement” (Dewey 1934, p. 2). As Dewey puts it, “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience” (1934, p. 1). Dewey argues that the modern conception of art galleries makes them, amongst other things, “memorials to the rise of nationalism and imperialism” (Dewey 1934, p. 7). As works of art lose their “Indigenous” status, they acquire a new one, what Dewey calls “that of being specimens of fine art and nothing else” (Dewey 1934, p. 8). In the gallery space, a work of art becomes a symbol of power “isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (Dewey 1934, p. 1).

Autonomy vs. Heteronomy

Rancière observes that when the modern conception of museum and gallery spaces was born, around 1800, it unleashed bitter disputes between two schools of thought. On one side, museums were denounced as mausoleums dedicated to the separation of art and life. On the other, museums were blank surfaces for the direct and undistracted confrontation with the artwork itself (Rancière 2010, p. 130). Dewey is obviously a proponent of the first school of thought, but Rancière thinks both are misguided. According to Rancière, the art museum is an aesthetic condition that does not exhibit the mastery of sculptors or painters but rather displays the “living forms” they have produced (Rancière 2010, p. 130). In thinking about works on display in the museum as “living forms”, Rancière concludes that they bring about a sense of autonomy for the viewer (Rancière 2010, p. 125). This
An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

sense of autonomy stems from the sense of self-regulation that an artwork possesses. The autonomy doesn’t reside in the work of art itself but in the mode of experience it creates in proposing this self-regulation to a viewer and creating a relationship with them. In the creation of this autonomously governed experience, there is the expression of the ‘life’ that the first school of thought proposes is separated from ‘art’ by the museum, because there is a degree of freedom to think and act within the world of the work that is proposed. In this way, Rancière thinks that the idea of ‘life’ can in fact be retained in the autonomous experience of works of art in what he terms the “aesthetic regime”. Rancière’s idea of artistic regimes emerged when he became dissatisfied with the linear thinking of artistic movements, for example the emergence of modernism and its progression into postmodernism. Instead he advocates for a more ahistorical consideration of the arts according to “regimes”, which are not necessarily bound to periods of time. Rancière names these the “ethical regime”, “representational regime” and “aesthetic regime”. In the aesthetic regime, “language or images [or social forms like a support group]...are now used as poetic powers and ends in themselves, beyond any mimetic function” (Corcoran 2010, p. 22). By contrast, in Rancière’s ethical regime, works of art have no autonomy: “They are viewed as images to be questioned for their truth and for their effect on the ethos of individuals and the community” (Rancière 2002, p. 135). Likewise, in the representational regime, “works of art belong to the sphere of imitation, and so are no longer subject to the laws of truth or the common rules of utility. They are not so much copies of reality as ways of imposing a form on matter” (Rancière 2002, p. 135). As such, works within the ethical and representational regimes are subject to a set of intrinsic norms regarding the relationship between the form of the artwork and the content on which it is based. Consequently, Rancière feels that the experience of works in the ethical and representational regimes lack autonomy.

33 In Chapter 4, I will further explore the idea of the “world of the work” in relation to the Ignoramus Anonymous “paratexts”.
The audience experience within the aesthetic regime is not only one of autonomy but also one of heterogeneity. This is because the viewer who is the subject of the experience also faces the dismissal of a degree of his or her own autonomy in the wake of the world proposed through the artwork (Rancière 2010, p. 125). As a result, Rancière argues that museum and gallery situations should not be reduced to binaries like ‘autonomy’ and ‘heterogeneity’. Autonomy and heterogeneity are not mutually exclusive but intertwined. Likewise, museums and galleries are social spaces that are not completely separated from everyday life but intertwined with it as well.

Rancière draws on 18th Century writer and philosopher Friedrich Schiller to argue that art in the aesthetic regime is “a form of life in which art is not art” (Rancière 2010, p. 126). Aesthetic theorist Ales Erjavec observes that for Rancière, “artistic autonomy and heteronomy are always intertwined, with the aesthetic experience being autonomous and the creation of art heteronomous” (Erjavec 2012). The creation of the aesthetic experience, including the context, is heteronomous, because it involves being subjected to external laws, while the aesthetic experience itself is autonomous, because it is therein that a new freedom and way of living is born through the world proposed by the artwork. The autonomy of experience is brought about by a heteronomy of relations. Arts writer and researcher Andrew Chesher takes Rancière to believe that the intertwined nature of the autonomy and heteronomy of art does not mean that art specifically becomes life/not-art, or vice versa. Instead, what he means is that art and life are linked such that what is life introduces heterogeneity into art, and what is art introduces autonomy into what is life (Chesher 2017). Chesher (2017) explains that for Rancière, with the rise of the museum, art came to be open to reappropriation: “Works of the past” became “raw materials” that could be “re-viewed, re-framed, re-read, re-made” (Rancière 2010, p. 125). This in turn made the boundaries between the arts as separate disciplines, and those between art and other objects and activities, permeable, such that eventually the power of an artwork is transferred to any article of ordinary life (Rancière 2010, p. 134). In the new sensorium suggested by the museum, “common
objects may cross the border and enter the realm of artistic combination” (Rancière 2010, p. 133). Such a sensorium is an example of Rancière’s aesthetic regime of art, in which a structure or narrative reframes “the division of the forms of our experience” (Rancière 2010, p. 123). The context I implement to create Ignoramus Anonymous meetings is a structure that enacts such a re-framing of experience, and I will shortly come to unpack the heteronomy that underpins the autonomy of the project.

Chesher notes that autonomy in Rancière’s aesthetic regime is associated with the experience of the spectator rather than residing within the work itself (Chesher 2017), and herein resides an opportunity to expand upon Rancière’s thinking. Rancière’s philosophy provided the initial stimulus for Ignoramus Anonymous, and was invaluable in the early stages of my research into the use of social forms to explore the possible experience of both intellectual emancipation and intertwined autonomy and heteronomy within the art/not-art duality of the project. The opportunity this thinking provides me, as an artist-researcher, is to consider what such an experience actually is, what such an experience does, and how such an experience is created.

The viewer’s experience is always an imagined one for Rancière. Rancière is not interested in the personal and embodied side of experience. However, an experience must also have a personal and pragmatic quality to it that is practical and not just theoretical. Indeed, Dewey’s position is that experience comes from the interaction between a person and their environment (Dewey 1934, p. 15). Consequently, even a collective experience is made up of a group of individuals engaged in interacting. Rancière’s thinking always favours the theoretical over this sort of pragmatic how of experience. He never says what should be done or how to do it, but rather wants to help “invent other criteria for reflecting on the works of art, methods, and types of diagnostics that constitute art’s present” (Carnevale 2007, p. 269). My desires as an artist-researcher have come to focus on the actual act of reflection in order to understand the experience of Ignoramus Anonymous.
Reflection

In the pragmatist philosophy of John Dewey, I found a shared interest in the idea of reflection. Pragmatist philosophy seeks practical applications of understandings. Contemporary pragmatist philosopher Richard Shusterman notes that the goal of Dewey’s pragmatism is not to criticise reality but to change it (Shusterman 2000, p. 20). For Dewey, the idea and act of reflection is the process in which meaning and knowledge is drawn from lived experience in order to make such a change. Carol Rogers, a researcher in educational theory and practice, usefully distils what Dewey means by reflection into a series of basic criteria: it is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next, with deeper understanding of its relationships with, and connections to, other experiences and ideas. Ideally, it should happen in a community, in interaction with others, and requires an attitude that values the personal and intellectual growth of one’s self and of others (Rogers 2002, p. 845). Ignoramus Anonymous is predicated on the re-appropriation of the social form of the support group to bring about reflection in a related way. In fact, creating the conditions for reflection might be the work that Ignoramus Anonymous does.

Another philosopher for whom reflection is a vital activity is Donald Schön. He gives an in-depth consideration of “reflection-in-action” in his book The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think In Action (1983). For Schön, it is through reflection that we can bring our tacit understandings to the surface for criticism, particularly those understandings that have grown from the repetitive experiences of specialised practices (Schön 1983, p. 61). According to Schön, reflection allows an individual to experience and make sense of situations of uncertainty or uniqueness (Schön 1983, p. 61). This might also be where the work of Ignoramus Anonymous resides. Ignoramus Anonymous brings about the experience not of

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34 For Dewey, the role of art should also be to change reality. This is why it should be “removed from its sacralised compartmentalisation and introduced into the realm of the everyday” (Shusterman 2000, pp. 20-21).
tacit understandings but of latent ignorance and misunderstandings. It does so as a form of support and pedagogy, to make sense of the uncertainty and uniqueness of ignorance through personal and group reflection. With this new idea of *Ignoramus Anonymous* producing reflection, Dewey and Schön inspired the next stage of enquiry in my research: to merge their pragmatism with the continental philosophy of Rancière that was my starting point. My first concern in this enquiry was to work out the difference that must surely exist between the reflection that *Ignoramus Anonymous* might produce in a library setting, compared with artworld contexts and art museums like the MCA.

**The Museum Difference for *Ignoramus Anonymous***

Rancière acknowledges that a museum is not “merely a specific type of building, but a form of framing of common space and a mode of visibility” (Rancière 2010, p. 146). He contends that artworks are “disconnected from a specific destination” when on display in a museum, and “are offered to the same ‘indifferent’ gaze” of the public (Rancière 2010, p. 147). Rancière concludes that there is a paradoxical form of efficacy of art, which is caught between two paradigms with contrasting outcomes. The first is that of representational mediation, in which the mimesis of the artwork (if it is a mimetic work) is supposed to elicit a certain response from spectators. This is what he calls the pedagogical model of the efficacy of art. The second is ethical immediacy, in which there is an anti-representational abandonment of mimetic art in favour of framing a community as the artwork (Rancière 2010, pp. 143-145). Rancière’s problem stems from his position that art should not be “predicated on the addition of a feature to expression and

35 There are, of course, numerous other texts on the aesthetic context of the museum and gallery. One such text that tackles the site specificity and context specificity of an artwork is Brian O’Doherty’s *Inside the White Cube* (1999), a collection of essays first published in Artforum in 1976 and 1986. For the scope of this exegesis, I have chosen to limit myself to Rancière’s thinking on these ideas.

36 Rancière suggests that this paradigm stretches at least as far back at Plato, but has come to be espoused in a modern guise in which artists try to overturn the logic of the theatre by making the spectator active, by turning the art exhibition into a space of political activism or by artists going into the streets of derelict suburbs to invent new modes of social relations (Rancière 2010, p. 145).
movement”, which happens in both representational mediation and ethical immediacy (Rancière 2010, p. 146). He thinks that art should rather be based on the opposite: “subtraction and withdrawal” (Rancière 2010, p. 146). This subtraction and withdrawal happens in the aesthetic regime through what he terms the “efficacy of dissensus” (Rancière 2010, p. 147).

Dissensus happens when there is a disconnection between sensory forms, the significations that can be read in them, and their possible effects. It is not the designation of conflict but the idea of a specific sort of conflict between sense and sense, that is a sensory presentation and a making sense of it (Rancière 2010, p. 147). Ignoramus Anonymous embodies this paradoxical efficacy of dissensus. It is the representation of a support group that addresses no specific audience. It is a circle of chairs that waits for the arrival of the ignorant, i.e. anyone and everyone. My philosophy was that “whoever attends are the right people to be there”.37 The representation of the support group then mediates with ethical immediacy as if it is real. The community in attendance is framed as the artwork, whether they know it or not. There is then the withdrawal of Ignoramus Anonymous into an autonomous world established for the support group. It is a world in which a support group for ignorance genuinely exists. The marketing collateral for the project doesn’t encourage the public to attend a performance. Instead it merely advises that an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting will be taking place.38 Because of this twofold representational mediation and ethical immediacy, there is a paradoxical conflict between the sensory presentation of the meeting and a

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37 This is one of the principles of “Open Space Technology”, which is a self-organising practice to facilitate meetings (Owen 2008). Adopting the principle for Ignoramus Anonymous meetings meant that as a research project I felt a sense of liberation to what might have felt like the failure of meetings as an art project. If no one attends an art project, it will often feel like a failure for the artist. With this principle in place, if no one attends a particular Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, which has happened twice in the history of the project, then no one needed support on that occasion, which is something of a success. Furthermore, it is fodder for further research: Why did no one attend? What does that reveal?

38 For examples of these publicity materials, please refer to the ‘Publicity Materials’ section of the appendix to this exegesis, from page 9. In doing so, it is worth noting that indicators of ‘artness’ and ‘irony’ decrease in such materials over the course of my research, to the point where my name is not even necessarily used in the publicity of the project. I will reflect further on the development of these materials when I turn to consider the idea of “paratexts” in Chapter 4.
making sense of it. What this results in is an art/not-art duality for *Ignoramus Anonymous*, in which the project is not easily reconciled as one or the other.

What Rancière’s conception of the museum and *dissensus* is missing is insight into how individuals have their aesthetic experiences, and a “sensing” of them, actually framed and set off. Rancière notes that museums, theatres and books are aesthetic realities in and of themselves. They pre-date artistic intentions and strategies, and are not simply institutions but frameworks and distributions of space and the weaving of fabrics of perception (Rancière 2010, p. 149). They contain a “labour of fiction”, by which Rancière means that they involve

the reframing of the ‘real’, or the framing of a dissensus. Fiction is a way of changing existing modes of sensory presentations and forms of enunciation; of varying frames, scales and rhythms; and of building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective (Rancière 2010, p. 149).

Again, the problem for me is a pragmatic understanding of *how* this happens and how artists might utilise such intentions and strategies within their practices. Dewey gives this *how* some very specific consideration. He contends that aesthetic experience can be set off by everyday occurrences, including opening a book, directing a first glance at a painting, beginning to listen to a piece of music, entering a natural environment or building, or beginning a meal or conversation (Puolakka 2014). In this “setting off”, the individual engages in an unconscious form of framing for themselves. Philosopher Kalle Puolakka further discusses these considerations by Dewey. He notes that

aesthetic experience has a temporal aspect, which means that the material of the experience does not remain unchanged but the elements initiating the experience, like the first lines of the book, merge into new ones as the experience proceeds and complex relationships are formed between the past and newer elements of experience. When these different parts of the experience form a distinctive kind of orderly, developing unity that stands
out from the general experiential stream of our lives, the experience in question is an aesthetic experience (Puolakka 2014).

Rather than imagine what might be going on in the speculative experience of standing before an artwork, as Rancière does, Dewey grounds the idea of aesthetic experience as an event that unfolds for the individual. It takes place as a “unity” develops in order for an experience to be framed and “stand out”. As the temporal event unfolds and changes, new information continually feeds back into the changing experience. Writer Neil W. Browne interprets Dewey to be saying that the “physical world always intervenes into the cultural world” (Browne 2007, p. 174). Or as Dewey himself puts it, “what exists, co-exists and no change can either occur or be determined in inquiry in isolation from the connection of an existence with co-existing conditions” (Dewey 1939, p. 220). Attending the event of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting sets off an aesthetic experience. An encounter with Ignoramus Anonymous flyers might also “set off” an aesthetic experience, in the way that they expand the autonomy of the project. Before considering the flyers for the project, I will first focus on how the physical environment in which the meeting takes place intervenes within the unfolding experience.

The meeting does not take place in isolation from the environment in which it is located. It is a co-existing condition. When that co-existing condition is a museum, the work of reflection must surely be different than the reflecting a participant does somewhere else. As a co-existing condition, the representation of the support group meeting within the museum is connected to the very specific context of that site, contrary to Rancière’s thinking, and is offered to what is far from the “same ‘indifferent’ gaze” of the public (Rancière 2010, p. 147). Each member of the public has his or her own experience within the site of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, whether that be library, community centre, gallery or otherwise. Arts writer and researcher Anne Ring Peterson finds artist’s use of site-specific forms to

39 In Chapter 4 I will come to discuss these flyers as “paratexts” for the work of Ignoramus Anonymous.
be typified by the “use of the chosen site as an interpretive framework for an artwork that comments on and is commented on by its surroundings” (Peterson 2015, p. 101). This is what Schön might call the “back-talk” of reflection-in-action that is triggered by *Ignoramus Anonymous* (Schön 1983, p. 79). Back-talk involves the feedback loop between individuals and the situation that they find themselves in, and the two-fold manner in which the individual and the situation respond to and stimulate one another. There are two forms of back-talk going on here. The first is when an individual attends *Ignoramus Anonymous* and the context of the meeting “talks back” to them. The second is the back-talk to me as the artist and researcher for articulation in the form of this exegesis. What new appreciations and understandings have been generated through the reflective back-talk of different contexts for *Ignoramus Anonymous*? How might the location of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting act as a *frame* that sets off a different experience for an attendee and impact upon the unfolding experience through such back-talk?

**Framing**

Gale MacLachlan and Ian Reid give an in-depth analysis of the metaphor of “framing” in their book *Framing and Interpretation* (1994). MacLachlan and Reid discuss how “certain situations of spaces institutionalised by society can be seen as constituting semiotic fields within which events and relationships signify differently” (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p. 45). This can be seen in the way that a theatre, museum or art gallery, for example, acts as an initial frame that shapes the interpretation of the content therein (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p. 45). As artist and writer Allan Kaprow observes in his 1966 essay *Manifesto*, “[a]rt and life are not simply comingled...the name on the gallery or stage door assures us that whatever is contained within is art, and everything else is life” (Kaprow 1993, p. 82). As with the work of Kaprow, *Ignoramus Anonymous* reveals a lack of certainty in such a delineation. *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings might feel neither entirely artlike nor lifelike, but as Kaprow notes of such projects: “locating them in the framed
context of the conventional showplace [such as a gallery] is to suggest that there really are no uncertainties at all” (Kaprow 1993, p. 82). These frames are “metacommunicative” messages that help answer the question that sociologist Erving Goffman believes we ask ourselves when attending any situation: “What is it that is going on here?” (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p. 46). The museum frame allows each individual to reach the answer: “Oh...it’s art!”

**The Frame of Ignoramus Anonymous**

As a participatory performance, originally made for and presented within a library context, there was little to frame *Ignoramus Anonymous* as art. When an individual attends *Ignoramus Anonymous* and asks themselves Goffman’s question “What is it that is going on here?”, the unconscious query is quickly answered through my playful adoption of the social form of the support group. Seats are taken in a circle of chairs and I casually declare: “This is *Ignoramus Anonymous*, a support group for ignorance”. By commencing with the introductory act of guided meditation, I explain that this is a space to ask questions and receive support, without looking for answers for those questions.

After thinking about Dewey and Rancière, I reflected on the framing of *Ignoramus Anonymous* to ask a more probing question of my own regarding the situation I constructed. Not: “What is going on here?”, but rather: “What work is being done here?” How exactly is that work being done? Is that work different in the different contexts that *Ignoramus Anonymous* is presented in? How does the experience of the project differ in these different contexts? What new understandings of *Ignoramus Anonymous* can be reached through asking these questions?

I was wary of this lack of frame when considering the marketing collateral for the project in each location it was presented. I will discuss the paratextual framing of the *Ignoramus Anonymous* experience through such marketing in Chapter 4.
**Ignoramus Anonymous at MCA**

Monthly meetings of the project had been held at the State Library of NSW and Waverley Council Library for approximately 18 months. Then in 2014 I was invited to hold meetings at the MCA in Sydney as part of a program called Sonic Social, curated by Performance Space. My reading of Dewey and Rancière in relation to this presentation revealed to me that there was something to learn by comparing the project from the community context of the library to an artworld context like the MCA. I conversed with curators involved in the Sonic Social exhibition on this comparison, from both Performance Space and the MCA. These curators had attended Ignoramus Anonymous meetings at both libraries and the MCA. I was interested in how they saw the differences and similarities between these two incarnations of the project.

For Kelly McDonald, Assistant Curator at the MCA, the MCA is as fitting a location for Ignoramus Anonymous as the Waverley Council Library. This is because “both are bastions of knowledge and both are education spaces, even though the library might have more of a community context feeling to it” (McDonald 2019). McDonald notes that “somewhere like a park or café or bar would have been a real different context” (McDonald 2019). She recalls that we wanted to situate Ignoramus Anonymous outside of the actual gallery space of the museum and that the “Resource Room” was eventually chosen. The Resource Room sits adjacent to the main gallery of the MCA. It is a space that normally contains reading materials that complement the work on display in the gallery. It is rarely used as an exhibition space.

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41 This assertion from McDonald is recognised in the way that galleries and museums are included with libraries and archives in what is known as the ‘GLAM’ sector. GLAM is an acronym for galleries, libraries, archives and museums, and these cultural institutions are brought together as a sector that provides access to knowledge as part of their mission.

42 An exception of note is artist Lucas Ihlein’s Environmental Audit, which operated out of the Resource Room at the MCA in 2010. The project acted as a form of institutional critique, with specific regard to the environmental impact of the exhibition In the Balance: Art for a Changing World. Ihlein was in residence as part of the four-month exhibition, in the Resource Room, conducting conversations that mapped the worth of the museum putting on an exhibition about the environment. In a conversation with Ihlein about Environmental Audit, he recalled that the
McDonald experienced similar examples of ignorance being discussed at both Waverley Library and the MCA, which revolved particularly around “questions of understanding humanity” (McDonald 2019). She felt that a legitimate support group was enacted in both locations “because of the sincerity of my presence and opening meditation”, a reference to my performance craft (McDonald 2019).

Tulleah Pearce, Associate Curator at Performance Space, agreed with McDonald that similar examples of ignorance arose at the MCA as at the meeting she attended in advance at the State Library NSW. However, Pearce noted a difference in the machinations of the meeting itself. For her, there was a “feeling of needing to make the project more ‘worthwhile’ in a gallery context...whereas in the library the discussion was more attuned to the everyday, which facilitated an easier flow in the performance” (Pearce 2018). She suggested that at the MCA I had to “bring more” in my role, because there was slightly less sense of a flow to the conversation than there was at the library, and at the MCA “there was a noticeable increase of my labour and those participating, or at least the labour was more noticeable” (Pearce 2018). The allusions from Pearce to the idea of flow, labour and their transparency within the meeting is noteworthy in considering the shift in context from library to gallery. However, Pearce was also quick to note that she was an audience member at the library, and had greater personal responsibility at the MCA as curator, and that perhaps this shifted her own feelings and attentions within the work. Her experience was that “the library had a more community meeting feel” (Pearce 2018), presumably where the labour of an artist is not consciously being assessed by anyone present. Having said this, Pearce was of the opinion that the project “did the same work at both gallery and library, but perhaps not as quickly at the MCA, because of an anticipation of the work [as an art project] and a perceived order and control of how it would unfold” (Pearce 2018).

Resource Room was chosen as the location of the project for similar reasons to Ignoramus Anonymous (Ihlein 2019).
What I understand Pearce to mean by this was that the frame of art brings about certain behaviours when it is placed over a situation, provided that the frame is detectable to those in attendance. The frame was concealed in the library, but readily detectable at the MCA. This means that people responded to the situation in terms of how a participatory performance in the field of live art might operate, rather than how a support group might operate. Pearce recalls feeling a sense of genuine participation with *Ignoramus Anonymous*, “as opposed to filling in a blank in the artwork” (Pearce 2018). Pearce and I agreed that such a blank was the not uncommon empty gesture by the artist to give an empowering sense of agency to the public participating in their work.43 That the public is empowered with a sense of their own agency is often a fallacy because all they are really doing is filling in a blank in the work left by the artist for them to complete.44 Pearce ultimately felt that “the project restores the wonderment and pondering that is lacking in the everyday” (Pearce 2018). Could this possibly be qualified in some fashion as the *work* the project is doing as an aesthetic experience of reflection?

Pearce went on to make a simple observation that I had not considered, that *Ignoramus Anonymous* could also never be done at just any room in any library. There is a degree of privacy and intimacy required to run a meeting, as well as the obvious need to be able to conduct a conversation. The meeting cannot take place between the shelves of a library, for example, where it would both bother and be bothered by passersby. We really need to sit with ignorance together in a *private room* of the library.

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43 I started using the phrase “empty gesture” to refer to cases wherein artists call for participation in their works after collaborating with artist Sarah Rodigari in 2010. The expression was something of a starting point for Rodigari’s own practice-based academic research in her PhD thesis, titled *Empty Gesture: Artists’ Labour in Socially Engaged Art* (2017).

44 The idea of the empty gesture of the artist for the emancipation of their audience by having them complete an artwork, and the problematic ethics therein, have been discussed at length by the likes of Claire Bishop in *Artificial Hells* (2012) and Miwon Kwon in *One Place after Another: Site Specific Art and Locational Identity* (2002). Such fraught gestures are often connected to Roland Barthes’ essay *Death of the Author*, which features in *Image Music Text* (1977), as well as Umberto Eco’s *The Open Work* (1989), and more recently to Rancière’s *The Emancipated Spectator* (2007). Elsewhere I have written about heckling as a true expression of the agency of an audience, because it is against the grain of the artist’s wishes and intentions (Whittaker 2015).
There are also library-to-library differences as there are library-to-gallery differences. There are differences, for example, between the humble meeting room of the more community oriented Waverley Council Library in the Eastern Suburbs of Sydney, pictured above, and the regal Shakespeare Room in which meetings were held in the illustrious State Library of NSW, pictured below. These differences in location also result in differences in the types of people attending the meetings in these locations.

Figure 4: An example of the set up for an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting at Waverley Council Library (2016). Photograph: Elizabeth Reidy.
Discussing these differences with Pearce led her to make the salient point that the project was perhaps not actually much different between contexts “because people are the context” (Pearce 2018). The people change meeting to meeting. For Pearce, “the transition from library to MCA is perhaps not as significant as the transition of the people and date of the meeting” (Pearce 2018). Her comments made me consider the way in which I am the only constant (albeit evolving) presence and there are different people with different expectations present at every meeting. I might provide the context but that context is made up of people. Having said this, it is also important to note that of course different people are drawn to different contexts, and consequently the physical location is still a determining factor.
On the idea that *Ignoramus Anonymous* might provoke a sense of wonder and reflection in everyday life, and the way in which the time period of a meeting might play a part in the meaning produced by the project, artist and ‘Digital Learning Producer’ for the MCA, Alex White, spoke of the “timeliness” of *Ignoramus Anonymous*. For White it was timely considering the place of knowledge today, where it can be crowd sourced and take the form of instructional YouTube videos and Wikipedia entries. You can look up four different recipes online and blend them on the fly based on what is in the pantry, or what you might reckon might be best (White 2018).

White was of the belief that “seeking this information is less conscious. It happens in a turn to the phone, without realising it” (White 2018). This creates that lack of “wonder and pondering” that Pearce talked about. White feels that the “distinction between knowledge and understanding remains the same, but that we can fact check quicker now”. White wondered what *Ignoramus Anonymous* might have been like if it had been held 10–20 years ago, before the availability of smartphones. How would it be different? How would it be the same? He also wondered what the contribution of capitalism was towards our ignorance, noting that what we need to know in the wake of capitalism has shifted as knowledge has been distributed and “farmed out” (White 2018).

In *Flows of Knowledge Through Late Capitalism* (2008), writer and researcher Ben Woodard argues that our current stage of late capitalism has made the statement by Joseph Jacotot that “everyone is equally intelligent” a pill that is harder and harder to swallow (Woodard 2008). With the expanded use of media in this time,
including television and the Internet, as well as population growth, Woodard feels that this has only made apparent “more and more opportunities to be in the discomforting position of being overwhelmed by stupidity” (Woodard 2008). In considering these increased opportunities to be overwhelmed by stupidity, there is another suggestion here of a need for Ignoramus Anonymous and the work it might do. If there are more opportunities to be in this discomforting position, Ignoramus Anonymous might fruitfully provide an opportunity to come together to wonder and reflect, and in so doing provide a momentary freedom from being overwhelmed by stupidity through sharing and discussing that very stupidity. Consequently, it is worth also considering the way that Ignoramus Anonymous interacts with a more broad sense of the environment in which it takes place.

**Interaction with Environment**

I have previously discussed how a turn towards being vulnerable and honest with our ignorance can bring about the possibility of intellectual emancipation in the temporary micro-communities of Ignoramus Anonymous meetings. I was inspired to undertake the research that drew these conclusions based on observations of shame and embarrassment when it comes to ignorance, in both myself and in others. It is hard to imagine that this sort of shame and embarrassment of ignorance has not always been the case. I could only speculate on what it might be like to hold Ignoramus Anonymous meetings throughout the preceding decades. However, my conversation with White after meetings at the MCA triggered such speculation and reflection on the interaction between the project and the world around it.

The feedback from White and Pearce alludes to the time period and the people as part of the environment that Ignoramus Anonymous is located in (not solely the physical location of library or gallery). What the support group meeting proposes

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46 As per footnote 24: Whilst ignorance and stupidity might hold slightly different connotations for the reader, I am taking both words to synonymously mean having a lack of knowledge.
then is an interaction with that environment. For Dewey, the doing and undergoing of an interaction with such an environment “makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey 1934, p. 50). *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an experience is the result of the interaction between individuals and their environment which, when carried out, is a “transformation of interaction into participation and communication” (Dewey 1934, p. 22). When this interaction becomes participation and communication what we have is reflection. It is reflection because a response has been made to the environment. When it comes to ignorance, as I have observed, there is a cultural resistance to interact with it, let alone participate and communicate with it. Dewey notes that such resistance in an individual is often treated as an obstruction to be beaten down, rather than “as an invitation to reflection” (Dewey 1934, p. 46). Excess of doing, or excess of undergoing, may interfere with a reflective experience. Dewey notes that a reflective experience necessarily involves an active doing and a passive undergoing. The active element is the trying and doing, while the passive element is the undergoing. To experience something is to act upon it, and then to undergo the consequences. “We do something to the thing and then it does something to us in return” (Dewey 1916, p. 163). It is in the balance of the “intimate union of activity and undergoing its consequences which leads to recognition of meaning” (Dewey, 1916, p. 164). If, for example, there is the strong desire to learn something in particular, then resistance comes to be treated as something to conquer rather than as a moment for reflection. The undergoing of the learning may be valued without any perception of meaning. A balance is then required between doing and undergoing to achieve the reflective experience (Leddy 2016).

I argue that *Ignoramus Anonymous* makes this balanced invitation to reflection. It does so through the interaction it proposes, between those in attendance of the support group meeting with the others in attendance, and with both the physical

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47 Academic, physician and science writer Ben Goldacre makes this same observation in his book *Bad Science* (2008), specifically regarding the engagement by the public and the media on health and science issues. I will discuss such engagement further when I turn to the field of agnotology in Chapter 5.
and the socio-cultural environment of the meeting and the ignorance that is shared by everyone present. This is the work that the art is doing. To paraphrase Schön on what reflection is and connect it to *Ignoramus Anonymous*, the support group meetings for ignorance allow the experience of surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which participants find uncertain or unique. Those participants then reflect on the phenomenon of ignorance, and on the prior understandings that have been implicit in their behaviour in relation to ignorance. This then serves to generate both new broader understandings regarding ignorance and the possibility of a change in situations regarding ignorance beyond the *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting (Schön 1983, p. 68).

Whether the reflection brought about by the support group takes place in a gallery or a library, we always momentarily cut off our access to the internet for the duration of the hour-long meeting in order to sit with our ignorance. The libraries were the original location for the project, at first because they offered an ironic non-art location in which I wanted to play with the project. I will turn now to consider what irony does within the project.

**Ironic Ignorance**

Jaspers considers the ironic juxtaposition of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an artwork with the site of the library to be “gently provocative”, the library being a “self-proclaimed ‘knowledge landmark’, an emblem of institutionally sanctioned information and an antidote for ignorance” (Jaspers 2014). The library is a “backdrop” in which participants are invited “to embrace a ‘lack’ that is routinely suppressed in everyday life, underscoring the library’s purpose while flouting its resources” (Jaspers 2014). At *Ignoramus Anonymous* we flout the resources of the library in the sense that we openly disregard the wealth of knowledge that they contain, and continue to remain largely ignorant regarding what we discuss during the meeting.
The idea of an “ironic juxtaposition” between *Ignoramus Anonymous* and library might also suggest that there is something being concealed beneath the surface of the project. It might suggest that there has been further flouting of honest sincerity by the artist, in favour of heightened self-awareness and possibly self-referential and self-deprecating pessimism and humour. Indeed, when I presented an early draft of this chapter at the 2016 Performance Studies international conference I was met with a question regarding the traces of irony throughout the project, starting with the very title *Ignoramus Anonymous*. It was suggested that the project could possibly be perceived as parody. Consequently, it was questioned as to whether any sincere outcomes could be achieved within such an ironic framework.

Upon reflection, I consider the embodiment of the not-art support group form both sincere *and* ironic, akin to the way in which Rancièrê considers the autonomy and heteronomy of experience: they are two sides of the same coin, not mutually exclusive binaries. Irony and sincerity can be held together in a considered and simultaneous tension. The “life of art” of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, to use Ranciere’s phrase regarding the aesthetic regime, consists of a shuttling between irony and sincerity, “playing an autonomy against a heteronomy and a heteronomy against an autonomy, playing one linkage between art and non-art against another such linkage” (Ranciere 2010, p. 140). Being either overly ironic or overly sincere would result in being heavy-handed in the performance of the support group as an art project, as was the case in my initial trial of the project for my Waverley Council residency. What resulted was a lack of autonomy of experience and utility of function, and a situation that was not conducive for participation because it was excessively ironic.

Shuttling between irony and sincerity and playing the two off of one another sidesteps what Ranciere observes to be the vanishing points of “art becoming mere
life or art becoming mere art” (Ranciere 2010, p. 140). It avoids the entropy of these scenarios that each signify their own “end of art” (Ranciere 2010, p. 140). There are often laughs at Ignoramus Anonymous, but equally often there is also deep discussion. The irony of playing with expectation and wry amusement at the idea of a support group for ignorance is a disarming device to generate deep discussion. The irony creates a slipperiness in trying to reconcile the experience of the project as being one of autonomy or heteronomy, irony or sincerity, art or not-art. There is no turning away from the irony in the juxtaposition with the library setting. Rather, there is a revelling in the irony until an experience becomes palpable that this support group is an authentic one. When this experience is realised, there is a sense of what Dewey called for in the recovering of “the continuity of [a]esthetic experience with normal processes of living” (Dewey 1934, p. 9). An attendee of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting at the State Library NSW touched on how the irony of location facilitated this recovery:

I was struck by how much knowledge I was surrounded by but how little I possessed. A fetishising of knowledge was revealed as I bypassed the thousands upon thousands of books in the grand Mitchell Library to attend the support group in the adjoining Shakespeare Room.

This juxtaposition and ‘flouting’ of the library resources could further be thought of as another level of playing-with through the project, firstly of the social form of the support group, which then “plays-with” the institution of the library. A different sort of juxtaposition and occupation was at play in the holding of Ignoramus Anonymous meetings at the MCA. It was a sort of thumbing of the nose at the pretentiousness of understanding contemporary art, whilst simultaneously offering a space to discuss contemporary art practices and struggles to understand particular works on show in the gallery. It reminded me of when artist Stuart Ringholt conducted one of his long-running ‘Naturist Tours’ of large public galleries at the MCA in 2012, a performance work titled Preceded by a tour of the show by artist Stuart Ringholt, 6-8pm. The artist will be naked. Those who wish to join the tour must also be naked. Adults only. It possessed a similar institutional
critique as an art project, cleverly exploiting social phobias by harnessing one fear: the embarrassment of public nudity, in order to dispel another fear: the ‘understanding’ of ‘high art’ (Whittaker 2013b).

Pearce and McDonald observed the discussion of similar content at both library and gallery-based meetings, but meetings held in galleries did not involve the flouting of the resources for knowledge that libraries offer. Where an individual might enter a library for knowledge, it is not likely they enter the gallery for this same reason.49

**Conclusion: An Institutional Frame**

For Pearce, what the institutional frame of art at the MCA did was subtly reveal the labour of the meetings as a performance, in the sense that a focus was placed on my work as an artist. It created what Pearce perceived to be “boundaries” for attendees, based on them understanding the project as a participatory performance work rather than a support group meeting (Pearce 2018). This is yet another compromise for the autonomy of experience of the project in the wake of the heteronomy of the artistic frame made manifest by the institution. There is the suggestion in this discussion that the work could still be done in the gallery setting, perhaps not as a ‘genuine’ support group but through an artistic representation of one. However, this feels too black and white a distinction to make. What can be said is that there is always a greater context that frames the project, a greater context that the project co-exists with, another environment it interacts with. These contexts and environments range from the physical location

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49 Of course, like the observation by Pearce that there are library-to-library differences; there are gallery-to-gallery differences as well. The MCA is a major public gallery, with a high number of tourists making up the annual attendance figures. Tourists would be a different demographic with different reasons for visiting the gallery than those who might visit a private gallery or Artist-Run-Initiative, for example. In this way, the attendance of different contemporary art sites can often equate to the performance of different individual's desired sophistication, and this might further depend on the content of the actual exhibition as well. I will consider this further when I turn to a critique of relational aesthetics in the following chapter.
of meetings, to the socio-cultural period of a meeting, to the people who are present. If people are considered to be a primary form, material and context of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, then that leads to the challenges involved with relational aesthetics and relational artworks, and those issues require further consideration.
Chapter 3: The Challenges of Relational Aesthetics

The discussion on the MCA presentation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* is somewhat skewed by stemming from the host institutions and its curators, rather than members of the general public who attended. In our conversations about the project, Pearce and McDonald both situated *Ignoramus Anonymous* in the field of relational aesthetics. Their feedback is open to criticisms that are similar to those that Bishop makes of the utopic assertions that writer and curator Nicolas Bourriaud asserts regarding this field. Bourriaud uses the term relational aesthetics to describe tendencies of contemporary art of the 1990s that were preoccupied with the “invention of models of sociability” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 28). Bourriaud argues that these offered an alternative to those governed by the media spectacle and information networks of global capitalism (Bourriaud 2002, p. 28). For Bourriaud, relational artworks are often modelled on pre-existing professional activities and the “operative realism” of mimicking the relational worlds of these professions as a device of artistic production (Bourriaud 2002, p. 35). Since the publication of *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), when the public is used as a form or material or context for the making of art, a comparison is often made with relational aesthetics. As such, it is easy to see why Pearce and McDonald located *Ignoramus Anonymous* within this paradigm.

In this chapter, I explore the “operative realism” of *Ignoramus Anonymous* and the model of sociability proposed by the relational process of the project. I draw further on John Dewey to find a navigable path for the project through Bishop’s critique of both relational aesthetics and Kester’s dialogical aesthetics. This analysis leads me to consider *Ignoramus Anonymous* within the fields of social work and psychoanalysis, and argue that there is a sincerity to the social form of the support group. I assert that the ignorant turn that the support group elicits is what sets the project apart from other examples of relational art that deal with pedagogy. Firstly, I will consider the problem Bishop sees in the staging of relational aesthetics in gallery and museum contexts.
The Gallery Problem

For Bourriaud, relational aesthetics “take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 113), “rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 14). However, the specific examples of artworks that Bourriaud focuses on primarily take place within the independent and private symbolic space of the museum and gallery. There are echoes of Dewey in Bourriaud’s argument, in that he favours the idea of direct experience over the institutional reduction of art to the collection of material objects. A problem is the claim that relational aesthetics fosters democratic relations, in “microtopias”, between people and between “levels of reality” that are typically “kept apart from one another” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 8). The problem with the bringing together of people and of levels of reality is evident in Thai artist Rirkrit Tiravanija’s cooking projects, which Bourriaud often cites. Through a reading of Bishop, artist and writer Lucas Ihlein points to the heart of the problem: when curator Udo Kittelmann suggests that Tiravanija’s projects offer “an impressive experience of togetherness to everybody” (Kittelmann 1996), the “everybody” Kittelmann is referring to is a rather small social group. Bishop notes that Tiravanija’s microtopias give up on the idea of transformation in public culture and reduce their scope to the pleasures of a private group who identify with one another as gallery-goers (Ihlein 2007, p. 55). Whilst the projects might be humanising for the art world through engaging interactions between people within the gallery space, Bishop thinks that the utopian scope of such works is limited to very particular audiences, rather than being more broadly inclusive and genuinely socially transformative (Bishop 2004). Obviously whether *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings are held at either gallery or library, the ‘everybody’ that I intend the project to be for could be considered an equally small social group. However, I contend that a library does not face the same perception of cultural hierarchy that a gallery does.
The idea of a perceived cultural hierarchy relates to what French sociologist and philosopher Pierre Bourdieu refers to as social class behaviour. For Bourdieu, an individual has a set of preconscious dispositions regarding tastes and a sense of the self created by class, and these dispositions create patterns of observable behaviour that reproduce the individual in the position of the social class they currently occupy. An individual’s social class emerges within a social field and produces resultant social actions. These actions, and the social relations they produce, are then ascribed symbolic power via a historical contingency that feels somehow natural, but is in fact the misrecognition of an arbitrary character that is continually reproduced (Riley 2017). Social relations are reproduced to the point whereby the act of visiting a gallery becomes a cultural performance of the sophistication of an individual, over the more ‘common’ patronage of a local council library. What results is a different context of people forming *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings in the different locations in which meetings are held.

The *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings at libraries might be made up of individuals who identify as ‘library-goers’, whilst the gallery-based meetings might be made up of ‘gallery-goers’, but these are not necessarily discrete or opposing groups of people. What is more important is that when *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings take place in the library and community centre environments, these locations are multi-use spaces. The uses for these spaces might occasionally include art practices and projects, but this is rarely the primary focus for the space. Galleries, on the other hand, are primarily focused on art practices and projects, even in the educational programs they operate. The gallery context also has directly attributed a specific place for art, which significantly impacts the possibility for a sense of tension between art and not-art in such a space. Consequently, when *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings are held within library contexts, and especially at Thirroul Community Centre, that tension remains in place, and the members of the group are able to identify with one another as ignorant above all else. Ignorance is what brings the participants together, rather than being ‘art-goers’ or ‘library-goers’. The relations between Bourriaud’s aforementioned “levels of reality” that are fostered
in these non-art locations feels more able to be specifically the reality of ignorance, which is shared by each individual equally, as opposed to how our ignorance is normally “kept apart”, in sense that it is shied away from. This dichotomy is especially the case for Thirroul Community Centre, because what takes place at the centre is not institutionally curated or validated.50

When Ignoramus Anonymous takes place in an art-world environment it is a performance striving to be something else (and possibly achieving that goal), but a performance first and foremost. This was telling when examples of ignorance discussed in conversations after MCA meetings were commonly referred to as merely the “content” of the work, rather than the work. There was still potential regarding the work the project was doing. It could still be observed to be enacting support for latent ignorance through instigating conversations between strangers. It could still present the possibility of intellectual emancipation. It could still be observed to generate the work of reflection for each individual present. However, outside of the gallery presentations, Ignoramus Anonymous is not even framed as being “a work”, it is simply doing work, within actual life experience rather than as a representation of it. It is all verb and little noun. It is more slippery and troubling work. It requires participants to actively sit with gaps in knowledge and understanding at a genuine support group without immediately trying to fill those gaps with a deposit of information by a teacher, a textbook, or the internet. This leads to asking oneself the question: “How do I know things?” The follow up question to this for my ongoing research to continue to explore was: “What work does asking this question do?” I am about to suggest that asking these questions might provide a form of social work and support. Before I do, it is necessary to further discuss the dialogic aesthetics of how this work is undertaken within my framing of the project.

50 The Thirroul Community Centre is the only place that Ignoramus Anonymous meetings have been held without being curated by the host organisation. I simply paid a small fee to hire a room for the project to take place in, and then advertised the meetings. For a sense of the regular activities that are held in the Thirroul Community Centre, please refer to page 23 of the appendix of this exegesis.
Dialogic Aesthetics = Sacrificed Aesthetics?

Bishop’s critique of relational aesthetics also concerns the dialogic aesthetics of Grant Kester, a field in which I situated Ignoramus Anonymous in the previous chapters. Amidst the prevalence of similar post-studio practices that centred on participatory methodologies of socially engaged art, including dialogical art, relational aesthetics and new genre public art, Bishop takes particular issue with Kester’s dialogical aesthetics.51 She is critical of a perceived “absence of a commitment to aesthetics” within his analytical framework (Bishop 2006, p. 181). For Bishop, the artistic practices that Kester is lauding for creating co-authored situations represent a “sacrifice of authorship” and a romantic and fanciful “recovery of a phantasmic social bond” (Bishop 2006, p. 181). Kester responds to this criticism in a preface added to a 2013 reprint of his book Conversation Pieces (2004), claiming that there is a “strategic renegotiation of aesthetic autonomy” in dialogical aesthetics which, he argues, does not constitute a complete “disavowal or dismissal of the aesthetic” (Kester 2004, p. xvii). For Kester, renegotiating aesthetic autonomy means an audience can co-inhabit and govern the process and outcome of a project together with the artist. For Bishop, this results in a slightness to the work that is more concerned with ethics than aesthetics. Ignoramus Anonymous is able to shed new light within these much-discussed arguments, particularly when coupled with a reading of Dewey. This is because there is certainly a slightness to Ignoramus Anonymous, but as I will show, there is also an aesthetic experience in the conversation that is framed and generated. Indeed, maybe the slightness is even a good thing, because it can maintain an everyday experience within the aesthetic experience and an art/not-art duality to the project.

51 The theoretical frameworks of these practices are respectively articulated by Grant Kester in Conversation Pieces (2004), Nicolas Bourriaud in Relational Aesthetics (2002) and Suzanne Lacy in Mapping the Terrain: New Genre Public Art (1995).
Conversational Aesthetics

Dewey thinks an aesthetic experience has a unity of parts, which melt and fuse together “and yet do not disappear and lose their own character as they do so” (Dewey 1934, p. 38). In this way, an aesthetic experience is very much like a conversation for Dewey, because in a conversation “there is a continuous interchange and blending, and yet each speaker not only retains his own character, but manifests it more clearly” through the conversation (Dewey 1934, p. 38). Within both an aesthetic experience and a conversation there is constant movement that “prevents parts from gaining distinction” (Dewey 1934, p. 38). Both are more than the sum of their parts, which are “lost in it as distinctive traits” (Dewey 1934, p. 38). Within the aesthetic experience of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, and the conversation that constitutes the work, there is a demonstration of the Deweyan aesthetics at play in the dialogical practices that are Kester’s interest. There is also a demonstration of the antagonism that Bishop calls for in the situation participants are placed in with their ignorance, which I will come to discuss shortly.

When dialogue becomes “aestheticised”, in the sense of becoming “art”, Kester suggests that there is a laudable “decentering” that takes place, “a movement outside self (and self-interest) through dialogue extended over time” (Kester 2004, p. 85). There is a correlation here with movement for Dewey, in which there are no dead centres when we have such an experience (Dewey 1934, p. 38). The way in which this extends over time with Ignoramus Anonymous is different from the collaborative process that Kester largely focuses on in the making of projects within a community, for which extended periods of time are necessary to build trusting and meaningful relationships. The way that Ignoramus Anonymous extends over time is in the regular occurrences of meetings in consistent intervals in the fashion that other support groups run. A relationship and rapport with the local community who attend Ignoramus Anonymous is built up over the period that meetings are held, but this is achieved via the service that the support groups
offer rather than the direct invitation to collaborate and make an artwork together. This results in a sense of co-authorship by different people as a different context for the work, on a meeting-by-meeting basis. There is no consistent singular experience of aesthetic autonomy when it comes to _Ignoramus Anonymous_, as there is in Rancière’s speculative view when standing before a work of the aesthetic regime. Consequently, there is a movement beyond the individual people present at an _Ignoramus Anonymous_ meeting and the accumulation of a new whole that is inseparable from these individuals at each meeting.

**Romancing Autonomy**

Bishop, like Rancière, is critical of overly romantic views of aesthetic autonomy. The emergence of collaborative practices like those of dialogical aesthetics, according to Bishop, stems from an urgency of the political task of the left, but results in projects that are _automatically_ perceived to be equally important artistic gestures of resistance. The problem for Bishop is that in these practices and projects, there can be no failed, unsuccessful, unresolved, or boring works of collaborative art because all are perceived to be equally essential to the task of strengthening the social bond (Bishop 2006, p. 180).

Bishop demonstrates the problem in her advocacy of British artist Jeremy Deller’s 2001 project _The Battle of Orgreave_. The work involved the restaging of a violent encounter between miners and the police during the English miners’ strike of 1984 in the village of Orgreave in Yorkshire. Both miners and police involved in the original clash participated in the recreation, in collaboration with a re-enactment society. For Bishop, the work occupies a blurred territory between aesthetics and activism. The event was both politically legible and utterly pointless: It summoned the experiential potency of political demonstrations but only to expose a wrong seventeen years too late. It gathered the people together to remember and replay a disastrous event, but this remembrance took place in
circumstances more akin to a village fair, with a brass band, food stalls, and children running around (Bishop 2006, p. 182).

The involvement of historical reenactment societies in this staging then elevated the relatively recent events at Orgreave to the status of English history while drawing attention to this eccentric leisure activity in which bloody battles are enthusiastically replicated as a social and aesthetic diversion. The whole event could be understood as contemporary history painting that collapses representation and reality (Bishop 2006, p. 183).

What actually constitutes the work for Bishop is the idea of being almost teased with the efficacy of the project, and the simultaneity of representation and reality being held in tension together. The work is predicated precisely on a Rancièrian collapse of the autonomy of art into a position at one remove from instrumental rationality, whereby the heteronomy of art involves its blurring into life (Bishop 2006, p. 183). Bishop sees Kester as wanting to untangle this knot, or ignore it by seeking more concrete ends for art at the expense of the aesthetic. For Bishop, this misses the point because the aesthetic, following Rancière, is the ability to think through the productive contradictions of the relationship art has to social change, characterised precisely by the tension between faith in the autonomy of art and a belief in art as inextricably bound to the promise of a better world to come. For Rancière, the aesthetic doesn’t need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, as it already inherently contains this ameliorative promise (Bishop 2006, p. 183).

Bishop is sympathetic to Kester’s ambitions, but critical that these ambitions come at the expense of aesthetics (Bishop 2006, p. 180). She argues that Kester has sacrificed such an inquiry into art in favour of ethical heroism. The call from Bishop is for ethics, in the sense of moral principles, and aesthetics, in the sense of the creation and experience of art, to be considered in equal measure. For Bishop, one must never come at the expense of the other.
Antagonistic Aesthetics

Through a reading of political philosophers Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, Bishop advocates instead for a form of “antagonistic” aesthetics. This is based on the position that a “democratic society is one in which relations of conflict are sustained, not erased” (Bishop 2004, p. 66). In antagonistic aesthetics, sensations of “unease and discomfort” are privileged over “belonging” and there is a requirement for the artist and artwork to sustain “tension among viewers, participants, and context” (Bishop 2004, p. 70). The tension of such unease and discomfort are observed by Bishop in Deller’s project, wherein *The Battle of Orgreave* “didn’t seem to heal a wound so much as reopen it” (Bishop 2006, p. 181).

I have discussed the idea of tension in *Ignoramus Anonymous* in terms of the work being simultaneously an art project and a not-art project, but there is another tension within the meetings themselves. That tension is between the conflicting feelings that participants have between belonging to a temporary micro-community in which everyone is equally ignorant together, and the unease of how little each individual knows and how to address that ignorance. Comfort and unease are in tension with one another, because ignorance is sustained rather than erased.

Antagonism within *Ignoramus Anonymous*

After attending repeated meetings at Thirroul Community Centre, high-school teacher Katie Clarkson spoke to me about the discomforting experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous*. She described “a buzz of walking in and there being such a thing as a support group for ignorance” and the fun of “coming together with friends and strangers to discuss and reflect and massage around the edges of the known and the unknown, with sincerity and honesty” (Clarkson 2019). However, Clarkson noted feeling a sense of stress triggered in this process: “It was almost frustrating to have to have so many thoughts in the meeting. So many ideas were generated that they reached a bottleneck. So much popcorn was popping but you...
couldn’t possibly eat it all”. Within this frustration of not possibly being able to adequately cover everything in a single meeting was the unexpected revelation for Clarkson of how much she did not know, and how easy it was to shy away from this ignorance in favour of what she did know. She said that the discomfort of this remained after the meeting, but that there was a certain comfort in this as well, “in the way that we were all risking vulnerability and embarrassment together, with both friends and strangers” (Clarkson 2019). Clarkson recalled that this vulnerable feeling was present before the meeting even began, from the moment she decided she would attend, because “you don’t know what is going to happen when you arrive given how the event is marketed and represented” (Clarkson 2019). That vulnerable feeling remained for Clarkson because the risk of embarrassment was always still there, even in moments of “togetherness” (Clarkson 2019). One particular moment that Clarkson cited was when a medical doctor at one meeting confessed to always needing to pretend to know more than he does with his patients, and Clarkson and her colleagues likened this to their experience of teaching. Clarkson felt a sense of empathy with the doctor for having to deal with being “found out”. It was interesting to Clarkson, because “surely a doctor would be hard pressed to get away with something like that, whereas in teaching it is more of a philosophical concern to balance the pretence of knowing. Teaching has shifted to an idea of ‘co-learning’ but there has been no such shift in the medical profession” (Clarkson 2019).

The unease that Clarkson felt in this case is typical of Ignoramus Anonymous meetings. Such unease is not overtly dispelled by me or through the proceedings of a meeting, but a sense of community is achieved through what I thought of as a form of “intersubjective co-transference” of crises in ignorance. This term draws together recurrent terminology from Kester’s writing on dialogical aesthetics, and from psychoanalytic literature. In a dialogic aesthetic, for Kester, subjectivity is formed through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself, rather than through a process of aesthetic perception. “Discourse is not simply a tool to be used to communicate an a priori “content” with other already formed subjects but is itself
intended to model subjectivity” (Kester 2004, p. 112). Kester considers that through the act of dialogue itself, unexpected new insights are achieved via collaborative interaction and that these insights produce new forms of subjectivity and identity. He argues that identities are “enriched” or expanded through collaborative interaction, for both the dialogical artist and their collaborators. This leaves Kester with the question as to whether it is possible to conceive of this ontic payoff not as a singular possession to be won or lost at the expense of another but as a collectively realised event (Kester 2004, p. 122). There is a synergy here with the theoretical phenomenon of transference in the field of psychoanalysis. Where transference is typically characterised by the unconscious redirection of feelings that an individual has between people, a therapist can also create the context of an intersubjective field in which they participate in a feedback loop of transference with the subject. This was coined “cotransference” by psychoanalyst and philosopher Donna M. Orange. According to Orange, cotransference refers to the “concurrent and mutual organising activity of analyst and patient” (Orange 1995, p. 63). It describes the way in which a therapist might draw upon their own history and personality to better understand the experience of the patient through their own equally subjective experience (Orange 1995, p. 66). Orange argues that the cotransference of the perspective of the therapist must be known and acknowledged in order for them to become capable of empathy (Orange 1995, p. 71). Orange’s characterisation of cotransference echoes Kester’s interest in artists as context providers. When artists are context providers, dialogue produces intersubjective experiences between them and their collaborators and participants, which are analogous (but not identical) to those that take place between therapist and patient for Orange. When I implement the context of Ignoramus Anonymous, we become light-hearted therapists for each other in the way that we engage in intersubjective cotransference of the experience of being ignorant. This is how a typical support group functions, and is at the heart of the support group model. The group works together in a form of collective therapy for one another through shared experience and discussion, with intersubjectivity and cotransference taking place in the process. Orange notes that within cotransference it is important to
understand that there is often no way for a therapist to fix the situation or to “cure” the patients, and powerlessness must be accepted. The therapist must simply stay close to the experience of the patient (Orange 2010, p. 116).

Likewise, a support group meeting (whether for alcoholism or ignorance) requires those present to stay close to the experience of one another. It also involves taking note of the lack of a cure and the acceptance of powerlessness. William Griffith Wilson is the co-founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, and he is the author of the basic text for the fellowship that aims to achieve and maintain sobriety for its members. The full title of this text is Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More Than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism. Originally published in 1939, it introduced the world to the twelve-step method for treating addiction, but perhaps this would be slightly better phrased as a method for ‘coping with addiction’, for Wilson himself considers: “Once an alcoholic, always an alcoholic” (Wilson 1939, p. 33). As such, an individual remains in the on-going difficult state of alcoholism at the conclusion of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, or of ignorance at the conclusion of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. Through the “group work” dialogue of Ignoramus Anonymous, including intersubjective cotransference, a sense of support is enacted and takes on a durational quality at the conclusion of the event, but participants still remain ignorant. The idea of the “group work” dialogue of Ignoramus Anonymous arises when the project is located within the field of social work.

**Social Work**

In 2016, social work lecturer Mim Fox approached me to include Ignoramus Anonymous as part of the syllabus she was teaching on social work in the School of Health and Society at The University of Wollongong. She proposed Ignoramus Anonymous as an alternative form of group work that students might wish to consider in their studies to become social workers. The students could study
Ignoramus Anonymous through a recorded interview between Fox and myself on the project.

I took the inclusion of Ignoramus Anonymous in the curriculum to be validation of the legitimacy of the support group the project proposes. When I sat down with Fox in an interview of my own to discuss this with her, she explained that it was a contentious inclusion for her colleagues, who found the idea of a support group for ignorance to be “bizarre”, but that she very much found the project to constitute a legitimate form of group work as a support group. She was particularly interested in how the idea of social work might be seen through the lens of the creative arts. I was interested in how my practice in the field of the creative arts might be seen through the lens of social work. My interest was piqued by my intuition that the project was enacting the social work of providing support for ignorance, and a number of participants had alluded to feeling a sense of support from attending meetings. How might an excursion into the fields of social work and psychology help to glean an understanding of this particular idea of support offered by the project? In turn, how might this lead to a greater understanding of Ignoramus Anonymous and my own creative practice?

The research disciplines of social work and psychology employ methodologies that are based on social sciences models, which have highly specific evidentiary requirements concerning demonstrable impacts. I will leave it to Fox and the other researchers in these fields to determine what possible impact Ignoramus Anonymous might be able to contribute within their disciplines. In my creative arts research, my concern is building new knowledge through considering my practice in relation to these fields, and I have used my conversation with Fox to tease these understandings out regarding Ignoramus Anonymous.

52 For a full transcript of my interview with Fox, please refer to page 87 of the appendix of this exegesis.
For Fox, group work is constituted by the observation of a common need or a common area of disadvantage by a social worker. This is one of the first elements of social work that Fox teaches her students: Why do you think you need your group? Answering this question requires a “needs analysis” within the community in which the social work will be undertaken. What are the gaps and what are the interventions that could be made to address those gaps? Fox illustrates her point using the example of a group of people who have survived a tsunami. In the wake of the tsunami one might identify a community or “client group”, for whom there might be a problem in understanding and processing the experience that they have gone through. Once you have identified this need, through a process of consultation, a social worker would identify ways in which to address the gap and proceed to advertise availability of the groups (Fox 2019).

When I shifted from my initial idea of orchestrating a school of ignorance to running support groups for ignorance, as my “community benefit project” at Waverley Council, this was a tacit needs analysis on my part. It felt to me that there might be a gap in how we talk about what we do not know and understand in life. It was through this unconscious hunch of an informal needs analysis that
Ignoramus Anonymous was born. Fox suggests that this needs analysis should have continued in an on-going process of evaluation throughout the project, examining the impact or change that holding support groups for ignorance might have brought about. Such an examination is at the heart of this research project.

Fox asserts that what happens at an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting is the engagement of a safe space to explore what is quite a vulnerable life experience, which can actually have a lot of risk attached to it. By creating such a space within the group work of Ignoramus Anonymous she argues that a way of functioning is established that can then translate into people’s everyday lives. Even if I didn’t start with this intention, for Fox this is the greater purpose and outcome achieved by the project, noting spaces allowing for such vulnerability around not-knowing are rare in society (Fox 2019). However, Fox also concedes that a social worker should probably consider a sense of the causal factors that necessitate their group work. In regards to ignorance, we discussed causal concerns of social isolation and the impact of technology on propagating our ignorance, and the possible increase of mental health issues that might result from ignorance. Group work typically outlines these issues, and develops processes to address them to enact change (Fox 2019). 53

Fox notes that even the idea of “support” is contentious in the field of social work. Social work takes place in a multidisciplinary space, whereas dedicated disciplines of psychology, psychiatry and medicine all stem from a scientific base. Because social work does not come from the same scientific roots, when a social worker says they are providing support it means something different to those who come from a more empirical base. Fox explains that this makes the term ‘support’ contested and difficult to define, and it often comes down to an individual feeling their own sense of support through the group work enacted, even if another individual may not feel this same sense of support (Fox 2019). This strikes me as

53 I will turn to consider some of the causes of ignorance when I situate Ignoramus Anonymous in relation to the field of agnotology in Chapter 5.
similar to the issues of efficacy that I have faced with *Ignoramus Anonymous* in my research. Even if ignorance might be a more nebulous concept than, for example, surviving cancer, the idea of defining and assessing support is in itself complex, whether at a support group for ignorance or a support group for cancer survivors. A cancer survivor’s support group is another example of group work that Fox cites, noting the many forms of support that might be necessary for an individual attending such a meeting, including peer support from fellow survivors as well as material support, psychological support, social support, intellectual support and physical support (Fox 2019).\textsuperscript{54} The group work meeting might be able to provide more than one of these forms of support, but will probably not be able to meet all the needs of the group. This was demonstrated to me when, concurrently with the run of *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings at Thirroul Community Centre in 2017, there were also support group meetings advertised for cancer survivors and chronic fatigue during the same period. On one occasion an *Ignoramus Anonymous* participant identified herself as a previous attendee of a support group for chronic fatigue. She found that group unhelpful because she felt the participants wallowed in their difficulties together, whereas at *Ignoramus Anonymous* there was a sense of awkward joy in the support we show each other by talking through our ignorance.

**Clinical Psychology**

In the field of clinical psychology, the act of naming, sharing and talking through difficulties is seen as central to forms of talk-therapies that allow discussion of problems between strangers. American psychologist Matthew Lieberman describes the science behind clinical psychology: “when you put feelings into words, you’re

\textsuperscript{54} American scholar Shannon Jackson gives an in-depth consideration of what may be considered the equivalent forms of support and support structures that exist within art practice and the artworld in her book *Social Works: Performing Art, Supporting Publics* (2011). Where Jackson’s focus is the relationship between “artmaking and the institutions that support both the aesthetic activity and the life it values” (Chansky 2013, p. 182), my concern is for a form of support that is directly provided by the artwork itself, and for something that is not necessarily recognised as requiring support: ignorance. Consequently, whilst there is some overlap between *Ignoramus Anonymous* and the rich insights that Jackson presents, those overlaps fall outside the scope of this research.
activating this prefrontal region and seeing a reduced response in the amygdala” (Weller 2013). Announcing the presence of a problem can be enough to cope with it, even if that problem might not go away in the process. If it does not solve the problem, then articulation can at least tie it down (Weller 2013). Once again, the problem is sustained rather than erased. In recognition of the way that Ignoramus Anonymous might tie down the problem of ignorance, in order to help cope with the anxieties it might cause, the project was curated into The Big Anxiety Festival in 2017. The focus of The Big Anxiety Festival was to question and reimagine the idea of mental health, and tackle the major anxieties of our times in the process. In this context, Ignoramus Anonymous more explicitly became an exploration of talk-therapy.

Two specific forms of talk-therapy are ‘Psychoanalytic Therapy’ and ‘Psychodynamic Therapy’, which both stem from the theories and principles of psychoanalysis. Donald Schön uses the case study of a psychotherapist to consider how such practices might involve reflection-in-action. For Schön, the psychotherapist gives an artistic performance within the underlying structure of a reflective conversation with a unique and uncertain situation (Schön 1983, p. 130). The psychotherapist “takes the reframed problem and conducts an experiment to discover what consequences and implications can be made to follow from it” (Schön 1983, p. 130). This chapter argues that the experiment of the therapist is similar in this way to the process that unfolds through Ignoramus Anonymous, in the sense that the relationship with the participant is converted into a world of inquiry in which thoughts and feelings are sources of discovery rather than concrete triggers to action. Like an untrained therapist, my role at Ignoramus Anonymous is predicated on an ability to reflect on my own experience of being with each participant, detecting the signs of my own countertransference, as well as an ability to elicit trust. This depends, in turn, on an ability to help the participant gain insight from revealed thoughts and feelings so that the effort of

55 The amygdala is a primary processor of memory, decision making and emotional experiences within the temporal lobes of the brain
the special relationship comes to seem worthwhile (Schön 1983, p. 161). The creation and maintenance of what Schön calls the “virtual world” of therapy is both a method of inquiry and a strategy of intervention in which this relationship takes place (Schön 1983, p. 161). A virtual world is “a constructed representation of the real world” (Schön 1983, p. 157). It is a context for experiment within which the therapist can suspend or control some of the everyday impediments which prevent rigorous reflection-in-action (Schön 1983, p. 162). In both the virtual world and “operative realism” (Bourriaud 2002, p. 35) of Ignoramus Anonymous as a support group for ignorance, a context is created in which the naming and sharing of ignorance can be discussed in a way that produces reflection-in-action, which is not dissimilar to the processes of therapy. Everyday impediments to confessing ignorance are suspended at Ignoramus Anonymous.

This thesis argues that it is my commitment to maintaining the social form of the support group that sets Ignoramus Anonymous apart within the field of socially engaged art. In her critique of the social turn in contemporary art, Bishop dedicates an entire chapter of Artificial Hells specifically to “Pedagogical Projects” within this field. I will turn now to navigate the rapport between Ignoramus Anonymous and other relational works that deal with forms of pedagogy.

**Pedagogical Projects**

Bishop discusses internationally renowned artists such as Tania Bruguera, Thomas Hirschhorn and Joseph Beuys in terms of their concern for education in their relational work. Locally, some of my peers have also been showing an interest in the educational turn throughout the period in which I have been developing and presenting Ignoramus Anonymous. Melbourne-based artist Lara Thoms’ The Experts Project (2010-2013) demonstrates an interest in knowledge economies and information exchange, as does Sydney-based artist Kelly Doley’s The Learning

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56 In Chapter 6 I will assert that Ignoramus Anonymous is perhaps best thought of as a constructed situation that takes the form of a support group for ignorance.
Centre (2010-2013), in which she paints a picture for a participant in exchange for a lesson from them. These are but two examples of local Australian artists who have developed projects that implement processes of teaching and learning using relational and dialogical aesthetics, encouraging participants to identify areas of their own expertise and positioning these participants as teachers, employing the democratic sensibility of many barter-based exchanges where teacher becomes student and vice versa (Meagher 2011, p. 27). International touchstones for such projects, with a playful subversion of the explicator role, can be observed in the documentary theatre work of German collective Rimini Protokoll, in which “real people” are always at the centre, and The Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge (2005-ongoing), a travelling installation of hundreds of experts offering lessons organised by the Berlin-based Mobile Academy.57 The Blackmarket for Useful Knowledge and Non-Knowledge is structured so that visitors can book a 30-minute session with an expert of their choice, visiting a range of people and topics over the course of an evening. Under the auspices of Mobile Academy, curator and dramaturg Hannah Hurtzig works to identify and collaborate with local experts according to a theme such as ‘Guilt’ or ‘Invisible and Ghostly Knowledge’ (Manson 2009).

The work of these artists creates a field that allows my work with Ignoramus Anonymous to exist. As artists, we are not working in isolation from one another. The different versions of the different projects we produce allow for advances in this field. An advance that Ignoramus Anonymous makes is in the removal of the explicator role. Ignoramus Anonymous is about an emphatic turn away from what is known and can be transferred by teacher or student (or indeed artist or spectator), and a turn toward what is unknown and nontransferable. At Ignoramus Anonymous

57 The publication Experts of the Everyday (Dreyssé 2008) contains extensive reflections on the ways in which the “real people” in the work of Rimini Protokoll are engaged as experts in their daily lives.
the contemplation of ignorance “as a cultural phenomenon” is privileged over teaching and learning. . . . By virtue of its democratic structure, the work also encourages storytelling, speculation and the contestation of different perspectives: a mode of active formation rather than passive reception . . . while it occupies institutions in the business of cultivating expertise, *Ignoramus Anonymous* circumvents the kind of “pedagogical aesthetics” typically associated with the so-called educational turn in art (Jaspers 2014).

My argument is that *Ignoramus Anonymous* makes this circumvention by playing with a distinctive social form, expanding beyond pedagogical aesthetics and becoming the autonomous event of a real support group. This is not to say that the aforementioned projects of my colleagues were not also more than artworks involving pedagogy. Take Thoms’ *The Experts Project*, in which she seeks out niche and idiosyncratic expertise and knowledge in everyday individuals. Thoms did this by sitting at a table at a number of libraries with a sign that simply read “Expertise Desired”. Passersby would then sit with Thoms and share their expertise. This conversation was often followed by an arrangement for Thoms to visit the participant at their home or place of work and have her photo taken dressed as them. Like *Ignoramus Anonymous*, *The Experts Projects* also involves the autonomous experience of reflection-in-action, but there is a different kind of transference at play in the process.
The stories, lessons and documentation from Thoms’ process were shared in a series of performance-lectures and a publication. In the publication, artist and researcher Amy Spiers references curator and art historian Miwon Kwon, to assert that the process of exchange in such an artwork “tests the very possibility for social bonds...Interactions of this nature make explicit the social exchanges, negotiations and acts of faith that we must rely on, daily, in life” (Spiers 2012). On one level there is a re-valuing of knowledge in the project, and the honouring and teaching of expertise that is not normally given credit as knowledge. Some of these forms of knowledge and expertise include decorating toilet roll holders, the running of an illegal gay bar, setting up a home church, counselling while hairdressing, polyamory and writing love songs (Priest 2012). On another level, the “project offers us new images and accounts of what people might know, share and exchange. By doing so, it tests out the possibilities for different types of relations” (Spiers 2012). Ignoramus Anonymous also tests out possibilities for different types of relations to knowledge and to strangers, and it does so through an emphatic
turn away from teaching and explication. This turn is made through the adoption of the social form of the support group, in which a self-containment and self-sufficiency is made manifest.

The support group was originally made manifest through the unconscious needs analysis for such a space for ignorance that I initially conducted through my Waverley Council residency. Through the ongoing feedback of the usefulness of such a space, there was a modeling in my art practice on the pre-existing professional activity of social work. In working through the ideas and strategies underpinning my art practice in this process, a methodology surprisingly akin to the needs analysis characteristically aligned with social work emerged, and indeed the operative realism of mimicking the relational world of this profession is my methodology for producing *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This aligns with Bourriaud’s thinking on how relational aesthetics operate (Bourriaud 2002, p. 35). My mimicking of a readymade social form can then be observed to embody what performance-theorist Richard Schechner refers to as the “make-belief” as opposed to the “make-believe” of certain performance practices. For Schechner, performances in everyday life, such as roles of gender, race and profession, shape the identity of an individual and are not make-believe actions, like playing a role on stage or in a film is liable to be. This chapter argues that *Ignoramus Anonymous* may be understood as a performance of everyday life being ‘make-belief’ in the sense that the project creates the very social realities it enacts. If it were ‘make-believe’ then the distinction between what is real and what is pretended would be kept clear (Schechner 2006, p. 42).

58 *The Experts Project* also shares a similar developmental trajectory and artistic craft with *Ignoramus Anonymous*. Both began in library contexts and were subsequently presented in artworld contexts, including the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney. Both also rely on our framing and conversational practices as artists.

59 Likewise, Thoms’ project involves the make-belief of participants as the experts they truly are.
Conclusion: The Ameliorative Promise of *Ignoramus Anonymous*

The make-belief of *Ignoramus Anonymous* suggests the ameliorative promise of a world in which we don’t shy away from our ignorance but actively embrace it. There is no sacrifice of aesthetics in order to make this promise, as I have explained through a reading of Dewey. There is still an aesthetic quality to the slightness of the conversation that makes up the support group for ignorance, in which Bishop’s desire for antagonism is also inherent. Where Deller’s project occupied a blurred territory between aesthetics and activism, *Ignoramus Anonymous* occupies a blurred territory between aesthetics and social work. It teases with a sense of efficacy regarding what it can achieve within the latter, whilst clearly demonstrating the dialogical practices of the field of relational aesthetics. Where Thoms’ project reconfigured the explicator role and how we might value knowledge, in *Ignoramus Anonymous* ignorance is antagonistically sustained rather than erased. Ignorance is sustained but supported, because that is what support groups do. The operational form is what sets *Ignoramus Anonymous* apart in the field of relational aesthetics and addresses the challenges I have discussed within this terrain. In the next chapter I will turn to consider the artistic craft behind this social work that *Ignoramus Anonymous* does.
Chapter 4: Crafting *Ignoramus Anonymous*

Having generated a critique on the notion of efficacy within *Ignoramus Anonymous* in the previous chapter, this chapter considers how the work does its work. Borrowing from British philosopher J.L. Austin to expand Kester’s dialogical aesthetics, this chapter argues that *Ignoramus Anonymous* is framed by “doing things with words” (Austin 1962). I will demonstrate how my ‘doing of things with words’ generates the aesthetic experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, and keeps the project attuned to everyday life and the social form of a support group. In the process, I will continue to use *Ignoramus Anonymous* to navigate the thinking of Dewey, Bishop, Kester and Schön, focusing on what this thesis argues is often absent in the existing literature on socially engaged art: a consideration of artistic craft. Consequently, I will explore two specific “things I do with words” in order to conduct the work of *Ignoramus Anonymous*: firstly, in regards to the “paratexts” that surround the project; and secondly through the conversational ‘machine’ of the support group itself, which brings about reflection-in-action through my particular practice of dialogic aesthetics. Critically, it is my craft of performance that allows *Ignoramus Anonymous* to remain attuned to an everyday aesthetic experience. I have utilised this craft to shape the performative persona of an ‘intellectual midwife’ for myself, through which I have conducted both the hosting of *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings and produced the new knowledge of my research.

**Persona: An Intellectual Midwife**

A persona is a social role performed for other people (Oxford Dictionary 2019). As such, the idea of persona is useful in understanding the social role I perform within *Ignoramus Anonymous*. To articulate the understanding I have developed regarding my *Ignoramus Anonymous* persona, it is worth a quick consideration of performance theorist Elinor Fuchs’ observation of the erasure of psychological character in many forms of contemporary performance (Fuchs 1996, p. 63). Fuchs
notes that the erasure of character can serve to achieve a “total state or condition” in the performance work (Fuchs 1996, p. 97). Instead of playing a character that might host a support group for ignorance, I adopt the persona of such a host. This is part of my strategy for actualising the support group, or achieving the “total state or condition” of the support group, as Fuchs might put it. Erasure of character is an example of what Fuchs terms an “aesthetic of absence”, which is used to destabilise meaning in theatre (Fuchs 1985). An aesthetic of absence plays out in my stripping away of the signifiers of Ignoramus Anonymous as an art project. My aesthetic of absence leads to a destabilisation regarding whether this is an art project or a support group, and adopting an everyday persona is significant within this process. I aim to be a personable, but far from virtuosic, host. I often bumble through proceedings, searching for the right words. I provide cheeky and lighthearted banter as I lead the group with confessions of my own ignorance and keep the meeting flowing and on track with my own inquisitions and active listening. I use the word ‘persona’ to describe myself as the host of Ignoramus Anonymous as a distinction from the character of a host. Where a character involves a sense of fiction, a persona is an aspect of an individual’s personality that is shaped and presented for perception by others. In place of an Ignoramus Anonymous character, I have honed a persona that is incredibly close to how I might actually present myself in an everyday scenario, such as a support group for ignorance. In honing this persona for Ignoramus Anonymous, the persona I present is akin to Plato’s description of Socrates as an “intellectual midwife”.

Philosopher Richard Bett notes that Plato’s Socrates is often misquoted as announcing that he knew that he knew nothing. However, “what he actually says is that he is well aware of not being at all wise – not of possessing no knowledge whatsoever beyond this one item” (Bett 2010, p. 219). This comes from Plato’s Apology (399BC), which is one of Plato’s many dialogues, wherein several characters often dispute a subject by questioning each other throughout a

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60 The wisdom that Socrates discovers that he is in possession of is the recognition that he lacks wisdom of any more exalted kind (Bett 2010, p. 219).
conversation. Writing in this way allows a multiplicity of perspectives to be rendered and enables the reader to draw their own conclusions as to the most valid (Hare 2010). Plato’s Socrates in particular is regularly depicted asking questions rather than lecturing his interlocutors. Bett thinks this is a natural method for Socrates to proceed with because he does not claim to know the truth about the topics in question (Bett 2010, pp. 215-216). Plato’s Socrates is what Bett calls an “intellectual midwife – someone who is himself intellectually infertile, but who can inspire wisdom in others” (Bett 2010, p. 217). In this way, the implementation of both Jacotot’s universal teaching method and my own Ignoramus Anonymous meetings could be seen as similar forms of intellectual midwifery. Indeed, I assert that as the artist researcher behind Ignoramus Anonymous, I perform the persona of an intellectual midwife.

It is in Plato’s Theaeteus (369BC) dialogue that Socrates compares himself to a midwife, which he claims to have been his mother’s profession. In the text, Socrates ascribes to himself a vital role in inquiry despite, or perhaps even because of, his ignorance. There is no suggestion that he is wiser than everyone else. On the contrary, the midwife analogy suggests that other people with whom he interacts are capable, with his caring guidance, of expressing truths that he himself could not have expressed on his own. It is not suggested that this invariably happens, and it does not actually happen in the Theaetetus text. However, there is the suggestion that lessons of this discussion will be useful if the character of Theaetetus ever engages in future discussions on the same topic. It is suggested that if he ever does come to an understanding of the topic, which in this case centres on the nature of knowledge itself, he will be more gentle and less obnoxious to his companions as a result of not thinking that he knows what he does not know (Bett 2010, pp. 232 – 233).

What Plato’s Socrates does within these dialogues is akin to what I do within Ignoramus Anonymous: create a context for dialogue and steward the experience for participants therein. It is in this stewarding that we are intellectual midwives,
because we do not make unilateral deposits of knowledge but rather create contexts in which there is the possibility for participants to birth their own new knowledge. My achievement of this possibility is contingent on my craft of facilitating the *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings. Facilitation involves identifiable skills; such as the learning and repeating of the names of those in attendance, introducing targeted questions to move the conversation forward, and closely listening to what is raised by participants in order to make links between what has previously been said and create a collective memory for the conversation in which the experience feels holistic. My aim is to craft a caring, considerate and generous space of gentle good humour and charm, building an initial supportive midwifery relationship, in which we can then make the discomforting turn towards ignorance together. The skills involved in this stage are far more difficult to identify or quantify. They relate to a performative sense of intuition about how long to let a silence sit, or to whom to turn my attention, or how much of a role to play as ‘host’ or as simply another ‘participant’. These intuitive skills are difficult to articulate, but what can be said is that they have been shaped through my persona as an intellectual midwife. In shaping this persona, I have ascribed myself the role of a gentle but cheeky inquirer, based in large part upon my own ignorance. As is suggested by the midwife analogy, I aim to interact with the group with honest and caring guidance, using my experience to create a space in which we can inquire into our collective ignorance together, and birth new knowledge in the process. I shall now turn to investigate how these skills of intellectual midwifery play out in an *Ignoramus Anonymous* conversation, in a manner that remains attuned to an everyday aesthetic experience.

**Conversation: An Everyday Aesthetic**

Kester argues that a dialogic aesthetic forms subjectivity through discourse and intersubjective exchange itself, rather than through a process of aesthetic perception. Discourse is not simply a communicative tool but a model of subjectivity (Kester 2004, p. 112). Bishop counters Kester by contending that in
discursive projects these “intersubjective relations are not an end in themselves” (Bishop 2012, p. 19). She takes issue with the idea that art, according to her interpretation of Kester’s argument, must extract itself from what is perceived to be the useless domain of the aesthetic and become fused with social praxis (Bishop 2006, p. 183). From this we can take Bishop to mean that Kester privileges the social processes and everyday actions that might result from art, whereas she is of the belief that an aesthetic consideration of the art itself should be of equal concern.

In my practice-based research through Ignoramus Anonymous, what has been revealed to me is a new line of thinking that might bring the two sides of this debate together. Evolving from my reading of Dewey, this chapter seeks to demonstrate that not only are there processes of aesthetic perception at play in social praxis, but that the everyday has an aesthetic. Dewey thought that in order to understand the aesthetic in its approved forms, one must begin with it in the raw events and scenes that hold the attention of an individual, arousing their interest and affording the individual a sense of enjoyment as they look and listen (Dewey 1934, p. 3). For Dewey, aesthetic experience, indeed all experience, is constituted by such an interaction between people and their environment. The experiences of life do not take place within an environment or because of an environment, but in interaction with it (Dewey 1934, p. 12). In such a definition, intersubjective relations are an aesthetic end unto themselves because they are brought about via an interaction. Consequently, interaction is necessary for aesthetic experience and can in fact constitute the experience itself. The aesthetic is already fused with social praxis, and within social praxis there is a process of aesthetic perception. As philosopher Arnold Berleant notes, a social situation can itself become the focus of perceptual attention. The participants within the

6a Praxis involves the practice or process of an activity of doing based on a theory or lesson, as distinguished from theory itself, from the Greek theoria, which involves thinking and contemplation. Together with poiesis, the activity of making and producing by acting upon materials, Aristotle contends that these are the three basic activities in which people engage (Smith 2011). For Paulo Freire, praxis involves reflection and action coupled together, and it should directed specifically in revolutionary efforts at power structures to be transformed (Freire 1970, p. 107).
situation contribute to creating the aesthetic character of the situation, working as a performer might at enhancing this character (Berleant 2005, p. 31). For Berleant, the social situation becomes an aesthetic experience when aesthetic features predominate. Features such as;

full acceptance of others, heightened perception, particularly of the sensuous qualities, the freshness and excitement of discovery, recognition of the uniqueness of the person and situation, mutual responsiveness, an occasion experienced as connected and integrated, the abandonment of separateness for full personal involvement, and a relinquishing of the restrictions and exclusivity that obstruct appreciation (Berleant 2005, p. 31).

In requiring the presence of these qualities, Berleant acknowledges that not all social situations are aesthetic situations. Of course, Dewey did not find the everyday to be unreservedly aesthetic either. Philosopher Kalle Puolakka notes that Dewey never provided a conclusive definition of aesthetic experience, but held that an experience must include specific qualities before it could be considered aesthetic in a genuine Deweyan sense. These qualities include cumulativeness, intensity, and fulfillment, in contrast with what Dewey calls “inchoate experience”, which involves a lack of development of these qualities (Puolakka 2014).

Puolakka draws on Dewey and Berleant to create an aesthetic analysis of one of life’s most common occurrences: conversation. Central to Puolakka’s argument is that the movement and rhythm of a conversation can make it into a genuine candidate for an aesthetic status. Puolakka proposes that, for Dewey, conversation has an aesthetic quality in terms of how it unfolds. The aesthetic is in the structure and form of the interaction, not necessarily the material that makes up the content (Puolakka 2017). In other words, it is in the context rather than the content that an everyday aesthetic is to be found in a simple conversation. It is not that the content is superfluous in the perception of an aesthetic experience, but that it is secondary to the initial contextualising structure of the experience. The context aestheticises the content. Given the right contextualising structure and form, the
conversation can be aesthetic in the way the experience of it “has a satisfying emotional quality because it possesses internal integration and fulfillment reached through ordered and organised movement” (Puolakka 2017). Puolakka notes that not all conversations exhibit this type of developmental structure. Instead of achieving fulfillment through a process of accumulation, a conversation might have beginnings and cessations but no genuine initiations or conclusions. This would not constitute an aesthetic experience because there is only a loose sequence of different parts of the interaction, and the participants of the situation are left on the outside to feel inconsequential, in “a way the conversation just drifts and ends at a random point. Such conversations terminate without the sense of closure that Dewey insists is essential to aesthetic experience” (Puolakka 2017).

In light of Bishop’s thinking on the idea of antagonism in relational aesthetics, it is harder to accept that closure is entirely necessary to an aesthetic experience, nor that fragmentation excludes the possibility of meaningful aesthetic experience. For Bishop, this stems from the problem of subjectivity in relational aesthetics. She notes that because subjectivity is not a self-transparent, rational and pure presence, but is irremediably decentred and incomplete, it means that individuals “have a failed structural identity” from the outset because they are “dependent on identification in order to proceed” (Bishop 2004, p. 66). Because subjectivity is this process of identification, we are necessarily incomplete and incomplete-able identities. For Bishop, antagonism is the relationship that emerges between such incomplete identities, particularly when they balance the tensions between imaginary ideals and the pragmatic management of their achievement (Bishop 2004, p. 66). In this way there is antagonism in the limits of society’s ability to fully constitute itself (Bishop 2004, p. 67). This inability to constitute an identity is inherent in the ignorance participants reveal to one another at an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. After all, how can an individual constitute their identity in the face of their ever-expanding awareness of their own ignorance? How do we balance the tension between the imaginary ideal of a world where individuals are more comfortably attuned with their ignorance, and the pragmatic management of
achieving and living in such a world?

In this way there is a conflict in defining the aesthetic experience of *IgnoramusAnonymous* in terms of the thinking of Dewey and Berleant. The meetings can trigger the fragmentation of antagonism, rather than the fulfillment of ordered and organised movement. Furthermore, a participant might even leave at a random point and without any sense of closure of the conversation. In such cases, *IgnoramusAnonymous* might not ‘add up’ to a genuinely Deweyean aesthetic experience, but it is somehow an aesthetic experience all the same. This is because what is most important to the aesthetic experience of *IgnoramusAnonymous* is the contextualising structure and form of the support group for ignorance, the employment of which produces conversations that have a slightly heightened aesthetic quality that is simultaneously inseparable from the everyday social praxis of the meetings. Aesthetic qualities accumulate through a process in which there is controlled development towards what Dewey calls *fulfillment* (Dewey 1934, p. 52).

At first, Dewey’s idea of fulfillment feels entwined with the problematic idea of efficacy regarding the achievement of a desired outcome. How could it be argued that attendees of *IgnoramusAnonymous* reached the necessary fulfillment to constitute an aesthetic experience of the project? However, this is to misunderstand what Dewey means by fulfillment. For Dewey, human development “consists in a rhythmic series of experiences that involves disorientation and reintegration with the environment. Each reintegration means fulfillment” (Samuel 2015, p. 100). Such development is the work that art does. It integrates an individual with their environment through an experience that is refined, accumulative and complete (Dewey 1934, pp. 161-162). If it were not an aesthetic experience, there would be dissipation rather than completion. There would be no grace or unity. The experience would be full of incoherence and slackness of loose ends (Dewey 1934, p. 41).
Ignoramus Anonymous meetings run for approximately one hour. After about an hour, the work itself formally concludes and takes on what Jaspers refers to as a “durational character, dispersing into the world at the end of the meetings” (Jaspers 2014). Might such dispersion be at odds with ideas of “completion” and “fulfillment”? I argue not. Whilst conversation might veer somewhat wildly around subjects of ignorance, the end is not the slackness of a loose end but the new beginning in a process of ongoing accumulation and reintegration of the project into the environment outside the support group circle.

Figure 7: Diagram demonstrating the accumulative flow and fulfillment of the aesthetic experience of Ignoramus Anonymous, from before, during and after the meeting. Image: Laura Caesar and Malcolm Whittaker.

For Jaspers, the opening meditation “deftly focuses the group’s attention” for the hour ahead, in which sincere self-reflexivity is prompted both during and after the fact (Jaspers 2014). It is in Jasper’s feeling of this self-reflexivity prompted both during and after the fact that the reintegration of Ignoramus Anonymous is evident, when the meeting ends and takes on the durational character that disperses into the world at the end of the meeting. It is almost as if the aesthetic
experience of self-reflection is carried by participants with them from a meeting upon its conclusion. On multiple occasions participants have informed me that an example of their ignorance only occurred to them after the meeting had concluded. What this suggests is that it is almost as if these participants have become more attuned to their ignorance in the wake of Ignoramus Anonymous, and they have become more comfortable and interested in discussing their ignorance in the process. The aesthetic experience that a meeting brings about for an individual then leaves with them and reintegrates with the everyday.

What requires further discussion is how this is all done. This is a notable absence in the existing literature on specific processes within socially engaged performance projects. Whether it is the literature of Bishop or Kester, or their many colleagues, academic analysis is nearly always at an objective distance. It is the domain of critics rather than artists. This is a contribution this PhD can make: an academic analysis from inside a project that sits in this field, rather than outside. It is an opportunity to provide a pragmatic analysis of the artistic craft behind these aesthetics being discussed and articulate an understanding of how this work is done. How, for example, does an artist keep the order and organised movement that Dewey thought necessary, towards integration and fulfillment? In the case of Ignoramus Anonymous it is through doing things with words.

Doing Things With Words

“Doing things with words” is an idea I have borrowed from British philosopher J. L. Austin. Like Dewey, Austin’s interest was in pragmatic action. Where Dewey focused on the work of art as a verb, Austin gave his attention to the way in which language is more than denotative and descriptive but the active doing of things with words and signs. Austin notes that certain uses of language do not describe or report anything at all. Such language is neither true nor false, and more than ‘just

saying something’ (Austin 1962, p. 5). Such language is *performative*, in the sense that it performs an action (Austin 1962, pp. 6-7). Austin uses examples ranging from the utterance of “With this ring I thee wed” to “I bet you x” to “I name this ship y”. In the right circumstances, these expressions do more than inform of the action that is happening; rather they make the action happen (Austin 1962, pp. 5-6).

The very title *Ignoramus Anonymous* is constative of a support group to anyone familiar with the naming practices of existing support groups, such as ‘Alcoholics Anonymous’ or ‘Narcotics Anonymous’. In this constative is the performatible action of bringing the support group for ignorance into existence. Regardless of whether an individual is familiar with what the title may denote, I begin each meeting with a welcome of everyone present and the declaration that “This is *Ignoramus Anonymous*, a support group for ignorance”. This is the performatible doing of an action in that it brings into being the support group. It is neither true nor false, in the same way it is neither art nor not-art. It answers Austin’s question as to whether saying it can make it so (Austin 1962, p. 7). Given the appropriate circumstance of the utterance taking place in a circle of chairs in a private room that was advertised as holding a support group for ignorance, and with the sincerity of the delivery, what unfolds now is a support group for ignorance.

Like Austin, I have often wondered whether ‘saying it can make so’ and have continued to explore this throughout my art practice. Each of my projects is grounded in an event that is not necessarily *about* something but rather *is* something, and this is initially brought about through the announcement of what this something is to audience members. It is a support group for ignorance. It is a walk in memory of lost and deceased pet dogs. The title and introductory actions of *Ignoramus Anonymous* are contextualising performatives that give the unfolding conversation an aesthetic quality, but also allow the event to remain within the realm of everyday social praxis. Rather than an unambiguous expression, such as ‘I bet’, ‘I promise’ or ‘I bequeath’, which Austin refers to as *explicit* performatives, the
contextualising language of *Ignoramus Anonymous* is conducted largely through these more *implicit* performatives (Austin 1962, p. 32). In thinking of how *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings are held, and the work of art conducted through the doing of things with words, in the form of both explicit and implicit performatives, I have broken down how this is done into three phases:

1. Before an individual arrives at the meeting, through *paratextual* collateral.
2. Upon arrival at the meeting, through the initial framing of the event.
3. During the meeting, through the conversation itself.

Each of these stages of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting involves the craft of contextualising and facilitating the project. The craft is employed by a ‘doing of things with words’. It allows the possession of internal integration towards a fulfillment reached through ordered and organised movement of the support group. The social form of this support group theoretically allows no member of the group to feel external and partial, because they are each made complicit in the meeting, and heightens perceptions within this mutually responsive context.

63 The contextualisation of the project as a support group is initially provided via the *Ignoramus Anonymous* paratexts.

**Paratexts**

“**Paratext**” is a concept coined by French literary theorist Gérard Genette in order to articulate what enables a text to be offered to the public as a book for interpretation. Genette observes that the contents of a book are rarely presented in an unadorned state. It is reinforced and accompanied by elements such as the name of the author, a title and illustrations. These elements surround and extend the text in order to present it for reception. Such accompanying elements are the *paratexts* of the work (Genette 1987, p. 1). Paratexts then are *framing devices* that present a threshold

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63 Pearce confirmed this in her feeling of a sense of genuine participation within *Ignoramus Anonymous*, “as opposed to filling in a blank in the artwork” (Pearce 2018).
that offers the world at large the possibility of either stepping inside or turning back. It is an "undefined zone" between the inside and the outside, a zone without any hard and fast boundary on either the inward side (turned toward the text) or the outward side (turned toward the world’s discourse about the text) (Genette 1987, p. 2).

This zone between text and off-text is a zone not only of transition but also of transaction. That transaction is a place of pragmatics and strategies to influence a public (Genette 1987, p. 2). Beyond literary interpretation, it can be observed that all art forms possess paratextual elements that create zones of transaction and influence with a public. Australian artist and writer Sean Lowry describes how American artist and scholar Joseph Grigely uses the term “exhibition prosthetics” to describe the way that supplementary materials live concurrently inside and outside a work in the context of the visual arts. Grigely is referring to the meaning-making role performed by background information, documentation, representations, and other materials operating at the fringes and margins of a work (Lowry 2016, p. 3). Lowry also finds similarity between the idea of the paratext and French philosopher Jacques Derrida’s concept of the “parergon”, which is used to describe elements that at first glance might appear to be an external supplement but actually form an essential part of how a public experiences a work (Lowry 2016, p. 3). Following on from Derrida’s idea of the parergon, Lowry argues that many elements that might otherwise be seen as supplementary clearly play an important mediatory role in a work of art. “In this sense, these elements should all be considered as part of an aggregate formation of perceptual objects contributing to the meaning-making matrix that is the work” (Lowry 2016, p. 7). All works of art have such a space created by the paratexts of the work. How can artists strategically use paratexts as elements that contribute to this meaning-making matrix that is their work? In order to consider an answer to this question, I will turn now to what I first thought of as the Ignoramus Anonymous “collateral”, but now think of as paratexts that expand the world of the

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64 I will further discuss Derrida’s idea of parergon in Chapter 6 when I turn back to a discussion of play as more than a supplementary part of work.
work. Lowry uses the expression “the world of the work” to describe the way in which actions and artefacts presented by artists might be understood as continuous with the surrounding contexts they both inhabit and implicate (Lowry 2016, p. 7). The paratexts that constitute the world of the work of Ignoramus Anonymous include the project logo, flyers used to advertise meetings, and a publication entitled The Little Book of Ignorance that was gifted to early attendees of the support group.65

Logo

The logo is the initial undefined paratextual zone between the inward side and outward side of the project (Genette 1987, p. 2). It is where the public makes the first transaction with Ignoramus Anonymous, and this moment sets a subtle precedent and understanding for the project. Whenever I was asked for an accompanying image to represent Ignoramus Anonymous in an art program listing, I would always provide the Ignoramus Anonymous logo:

![Ignoramus Anonymous logo](image)

Figure 8: Ignoramus Anonymous logo. Image: Marissa Gillies.

65 Each of these paratexts was produced in collaboration with graphic designer Marissa Gillies.
There were a number of occasions throughout the history of the project where marketing departments tried to insist on a different image to represent the work, because the logo wasn’t “dynamic” enough to sell the project and the festival or program that it was part of, or because it didn’t fit their design style. ‘Selling the project’, as is the business of marketing departments, often comes at the expense of the desires artists have for their work in this way. When this happened, I would try to maintain that this be the image we use. It would often come down to the realisation that a more dynamic image for the project could not be found.

The *Ignoramus Anonymous* world is pragmatic in terms of the support group that is offered to the public, because inherent in offering this support is the practical *doing of something*. It is also ambiguous in terms of what a member of the public might actually expect at the event, however straightforward the result really is, because a support group for ignorance did not previously exist in the public imagination. In the initial building of such a world for the project, there is a touch of irony apparent in the project title that resides beneath the *Ignoramus Anonymous* logo. That title, *Ignoramus Anonymous*, is suggestive of a support group, but it is an implicit rather than explicit performative. It suggests a support group without explicitly stating it is one. This is the balance I thought was important to get right in setting a precedent for the project with the public. For this reason, I did not see photographic documentation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an option for marketing use, because it would not strike such a balance. Still, having said this, something curious happened when *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings were to be held at The Wheeler Centre in Melbourne. The marketing department was completely transparent: They didn’t understand the project or how to pitch it. Consequently, I ran a meeting to demonstrate the project for the entire staff. This experience led me to further consider how the project might function as a team building exercise for workplaces. I hope to undertake future research exploring this possibility.

In many ways, these conversations with marketing departments triggered my reflection and consideration of the *Ignoramus Anonymous* paratexts, starting with the logo. The most significant of these conversations was with the marketing department of The Wheeler Centre, who did not end up using the project logo. Such interactions made me realise the holistic world I wanted to build for the project, and the way that such a world-building exercise requires a consideration of all the paratextual elements of a project.

Another reason that this was not an option is that very little documentation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* actually exists. Based on my desire for the work to be thought of as a “real support group”, and to retain the art/not-art duality of the project, I have tended to avoid documenting the meetings. The only documentation of the meetings themselves that has been taken is the result of...
marketing departments would regularly express the desire to run with documentation and other alternatives instead of the project logo.

My feeling was that the use of photographic documentation in marketing would be both an underwhelming ‘sell’, and also serve to dampen the possible mystery of expectation in attending the project. Images of people simply hanging out and talking with one another abound in relational art, in both the marketing of projects and in the documentation of projects as posterity for the artist. Such images are often nothing if not underwhelming. Take this example of one of the very few pieces of documentation that exists for an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, which was taken at the MCA at the insistence of Performance Space:

![Figure 9: Ignoramus Anonymous meeting at MCA, Sydney (2014). Photograph: Heidrun Löhr.](image)

the insistence by the host organisation. Consequently, a handful of photographs were staged for the MCA / Performance Space meetings. These images can be viewed on page 30 of the appendix. For the purposes of the examination of this thesis, a meeting was also staged for video documentation. That footage can be accessed via a link on page 32 of the appendix, should examiners (or future readers) wish to observe a recorded meeting.

69 Elsewhere I have praised artist Tino Sehgal for his commitment to denying documentation of the ‘constructed situations’ that make up the choreographies he stages in museum settings. However, I am also of the opinion that there is a possibility this is done to exploit a vacuity in the art world that celebrates self-mythologising. Sehgal’s ‘anti-documentation’ stance might be to focus on the ephemerality of his work, but it might also be a strategy to conceal the slightness of his work (Whittaker 2014).
I can see no real reason for this picture to exist in the public sphere, and not just because it would compromise the privacy of the support group meeting. As documentation, it says to the viewer that this is what happened as part of the project. Consequently, if what is contained within the picture is what *happened* as part of the work, then this might also suggest that the project is no longer *happening*. As such, there is no longer the undefined zone between the inside and outside of the work, “between text and off-text” (Genette 1987, p. 2), because the work itself has ceased.

If the image were coupled with advertising for a new support group session, then this might retain a sense of *on-goingness* for the work. However, if the image were to be used to market the project then this would take away the possibility of surprise upon arrival for participants of the simplicity of the event. Whilst surprise is not entirely necessary to the aesthetic experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, it can be observed to constitute a Rancièrian dissensus between the sensory presentation of the support group and a making sense of it (Rancière 2010, p. 147).

The dissensus is in the reframing of the social form of the support group that is made to be real as a support group for ignorance upon arrival to the meeting. In watching people arrive and be confronted with this dissensus, and the realisation of the intimate reality and literal support group that the project is, on several occasions this realisation prompted individuals to swiftly walk back out again and not return. Who knows what they were expecting?

**Alcoholics Anonymous**

My research showed that an actual support group would also not typically advertise their meetings with a picture of the support group. Alcoholics

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I recognise that I am now making such a compromise by committing this picture to a semi-public archive by including it here in my exegesis. This photograph was actually staged after a meeting at the MCA, with the participants who attended the meeting in question, so as not to impact upon the meeting itself. Further photographs from this series can be viewed on page 30 of the appendix.
Anonymous meetings typically advertise by partnering location information with their group logo:

![Alcoholics Anonymous logo](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcoholics_Anonymous)

Figure 10: Alcoholics Anonymous logo, viewed 18th August 2018, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcoholics_Anonymous](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alcoholics_Anonymous)

Within this logo, the circle stands for “the whole world of Alcoholics Anonymous”, and the triangle stands for their three legacies of ‘recovery’, ‘unity’ and ‘service’ (Wilson 1957, p. 139). My appropriation of the social form of the support group also included appropriating the way in which symbolic logos are used by existing support groups. Consequently, graphic designer Marissa Gillies and I came up with the *Ignoramus Anonymous* logo for use on all the paratexts of the project.

Whereas I had to continually insist on the use of the logo when *Ignoramus Anonymous* was curated into art programs, I had complete freedom to use the logo outside of institutional contexts, and did so for flyers and posters at Thirroul Community Centre and Frontyard Projects. The logo was adaptable for flyers and posters, as well as in art program listings, but this then raised further questions: How would the accompanying text on the flyer, poster or brochure further frame the project? How would these flyers and posters be designed?
Flyers

As one paratextual element, the *Ignoramus Anonymous* logo does not exist in isolation from other paratextual elements, such as the flyers and posters that the logo is placed upon, which are then used to advertise the support group meetings. Indeed, all this paratextual material does not exist in isolation from the event of the support group meeting itself. The idea of thinking of these elements as paratexts, as opposed to “collateral”, is that they form a rich tapestry that becomes part of the world of the work. Collateral suggests a secondary nature. In Genette’s notion of the paratext there is no such secondary nature. The world of the work lives on through each element associated with it. In the case of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, these elements combine to aestheticise the everyday conversation that forms the actual support group meeting itself. The paratexts accumulate to aestheticise the conversation of the support group meeting in the sense of Berleant’s philosophy touched on earlier (Berleant 2005, p. 31). The paratexts are the first stage of creating a context of heightened perception for participants. The paratexts call for an abandonment of separateness from the world of *Ignoramus Anonymous*. They set up an expectation for personal involvement, and to relinquish the restrictions and exclusivity that might obstruct appreciation. Indeed, this was precisely the feedback from a participant of the series of meetings at Thirroul Community Centre. Having recently moved to the area, this participant, who wishes to remain anonymous, was looking for ways to meet people and connect with the local community. She saw a flyer for *Ignoramus Anonymous* and thought it sounded “interesting and wacky”. She was intrigued by the “unknown of the flyer”, which aroused her speculation regarding what the event would entail. She felt her speculation began with the “fantastic title” of the project, which stimulated a sense of enquiry by placing the words ‘Ignoramus’ and ‘Anonymous’ together. The humour of this title on the flyer caught her attention and compelled the participant to first attend a meeting, because she thought it

71 In Chapter 6 I will liken the lack of a secondary position to Derrida’s idea of “supplementarity”.

Chapter 4: Crafting *Ignoramus Anonymous*
sounded “weird and fun”. Having said this, she did not feel as though she was coming along to a support group, but was rather “looking to meet people and chat about what everyone didn’t know for an hour or so” (Anonymous 2019). Regardless of the feeling that the meeting will be a legitimate support group or a friendly social occasion to meet new people, it is in the sense of intrigue and enquiry that the project flyers elicited for this particular participant that the aesthetic experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous* begins.

Based on my long-running involvement with *Ignoramus Anonymous*, how this aesthetic experience can be strategically created is contingent on the context in which the artist is working, and their ability to occupy that context with a context of their own. The freedom of the artist to blur a borderline between the inside and outside of their work depends on the other borders that exist in the context in which their work takes place. For this reason, I feel that it is easier to strategically engage with the paratextual elements outside of institutional contexts, where there is more freedom to do so. There is more freedom, for example, to unreservedly use an *Ignoramus Anonymous* logo when you don’t have to deal with a marketing department. There is more freedom, as another example, when advertising flyers are bespoke for the project as opposed to following the template or design of a host organisation. It is a question of authorial control over the paratextual material, and the need for consideration of this control is heightened when an artist wants to appropriate social forms and maintain the function and duality of that appropriated form. In such cases of appropriating social forms, as with *Ignoramus Anonymous*, there is perhaps a greater need to maintain a balance in the paratexts because the initial transaction can so easily communicate parody, suggesting illegitimacy and a dissolve of the art/not-art duality of the project into simply one or the other. It can also easily over-aestheticise and alienate.

Strategically getting this balance right with the flyers and posters of *Ignoramus Anonymous* was a rather difficult act, especially considering the increasing number

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72 For the range of marketing paratexts that have been generated around *Ignoramus Anonymous* please refer to the ‘Publicity Materials’ section of the appendix, from page 9.
of design elements at play in the material and the different contexts in which the meetings continued to be held. Each of these different contexts required a renegotiation of how the paratexts would engage the public. In the case of the art contexts that meetings were held in, that negotiation was a balancing act of a different sort. It was a balancing act between the style guides and marketing speak of the host institution, and how I wished the project to be represented. In my initial discussions with curators from host institutions I was able to use *The Little Book of Ignorance*, a publication I produced for the project, to further build upon the world of *Ignoramus Anonymous* and context of the support group.

**The Little Book of Ignorance**

In the lead up to the premiere of the project, in the form of the monthly meetings that took place at The State Library NSW, I worked with Gilles on a publication associated with the project. I called it *The Little Book of Ignorance*, and took this title from Wilson’s basic text for Alcoholics Anonymous: *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How Many Thousands of Men and Women Have Recovered from Alcoholism* (1939), which is more commonly known as *The Big Book of AA*.

*The Big Book of AA* describes how to recover from alcoholism and introduced the world to the ‘twelve step method’ for treating addiction. It contains success stories on those who have managed to treat their alcoholism by turning to what Alcoholics Anonymous refer to as a “higher power”. *The Little Book of Ignorance* contains an introduction to the project by me, along with little exercises I devised.

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73 *Ignoramus Anonymous* was actually curated into the MCA and Junction Arts Festival presentations without the curators having actually attended the support group meetings in advance. This speaks to the effectiveness of the paratexts building the world of the project throughout the monthly meetings at The State Library NSW and Waverley Council, to which those curators responded. The world of *Ignoramus Anonymous* was communicable through the paratexts alone, to the point that curators had a confident sense of that world to program the project. The curators responded to my casual flyers for *Ignoramus Anonymous* and requested meetings to discuss the possible inclusion of the project in their programming. Of course, the good rapport I have with these curators also had something to do with the programming of *Ignoramus Anonymous* in these contexts. In this way, the establishment of my identity as an artist might be considered to function as another paratext for the project.
for coping with ideas of ignorance. It also contains short contributions from artist colleagues on ignorance. These range from confessional stories of their own ignorance, to critical essays and satirical pieces.\footnote{For a full reprint of The Little Book of Ignorance, please refer to page 122 of the appendix.}

A print run of three hundred copies of The Little Book of Ignorance was published. The book was gifted to participants upon their arrival to support groups, until my stocks ran out. It gave participants something to hold on to and refer to in what could be the slightly awkward moment before the meetings would begin. Upon conclusion of the meeting, it became a memento in which the project lived on afterwards. As well as being an artwork in its own right, the publication functioned as a program or catalogue for Ignoramus Anonymous, but one that worked within the holistic world of the project at large. Adorned with the Ignoramus Anonymous logo in gloss on the cover, the slick black book was yet another expansive paratext for the project.
Upon reflection, *The Little Book of Ignorance* was probably over-aestheticised and out of sync with the paratextual world of support groups. I came to this realisation when my initial run of three hundred copies of the publication ran out. I wasn’t sure what to do. I worried about how the event would be framed without them. Those concerns gave me pause to critically reflect on what is and is not necessary for the work to do its work. As a paratextual element, *The Little Book of Ignorance* certainly inflected the experience of participants, but surely the work itself would be able to be carried on without the books?

This proved to be the case. Without the book the work was different, but not so much as to alter its essence. This is not to say that the publication was redundant as a paratext, but that perhaps by this time it was not as necessary to frame the meetings as I first thought. Consequently, I didn’t print another run of the publication.

The way that meetings ran without the books revealed their function as something of a supportive crutch for participants. Instead of immediately engaging with the slightly awkward and unusual situation of a support group for ignorance materialising around them, the books gave participants an outlet through which to postpone their engagement with this initial formation by enabling the act of isolated reading. I felt they created a more ‘gentle’ way to ‘ease into’ the world of the meeting, but it was not entirely necessary. What I did feel remained lacking without the books was a paratextual ‘living on’ of the world of the project after the meetings. The absence of the books, in this regard, led me to reconsider all the paratexts for the project and come to the realisation of the over-aestheticised nature of *The Little Book of Ignorance* that was somewhat out of sync with the world of support groups. The publication signified ‘art project’ much more than it did ‘support group’. In turn, this lead to my re-drafting of flyers for upcoming meetings at Thirroul Community Centre and Frontyard Projects. It is in the flyers for these meetings that I worked on achieving a more holistic world for *Ignoramus Anonymous*, right through to the paratextual collateral for the project that would
be akin to how a “real” support group for ignorance might be advertised.\(^{75}\) It was a case of expanding my occupation of the support group form into support group paratexts.\(^{76}\)

With or without *The Little Book of Ignorance*, the support groups would formally begin with the act of guided meditation. Upon concluding this meditation there would then be the inevitable pause amongst the group, before segueing into the meeting at large. From this point, in the wake of the framing of the project via the paratexts and physical location and set-up, the meetings then unfold through the conversation that makes up the event itself. Because of the initial framing, the conversation has an aesthetic that gives the meeting a holistic quality.

**Wholeness**

In recalling Dewey, a sense of wholeness is necessary to constitute an aesthetic experience, and achieving a sense of this wholeness is part of my practice of dialogical aesthetics and ‘doing of things with words’ at *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings. For Dewey, when such an experience is whole it carries its own individualising quality and self-sufficiency (Dewey, 1934, p. 37).\(^{77}\) Dewey suggests that if you recall an experience in your mind after it occurs, you will probably find that one property rather than another is sufficiently dominant so that it characterises the experience as a whole. There are absorbing enquiries and speculations that can be recalled as “experiences” in an emphatic sense, but the recollection of them makes them somewhat intellectual. In their actual occurrence they were also emotional, purposive and volitional. Yet the experience was not a

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\(^{75}\) For these paratexts please refer to pages 21-26 of the appendix.

\(^{76}\) Whilst they are not ‘support group paratexts’, Jaspers’ essay and this very exegesis are examples of further paratexts that serve to expand the world of *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

\(^{77}\) I refer here to the experience of the *Ignoramus Anonymous* event itself as holistic, which I argue is the case despite my previous discussion of the antagonistic fragmentation of identity that might take place via participating in the event. Indeed, the individualising quality and self-sufficiency of the holistic world of *Ignoramus Anonymous* does not actually need to be experienced as a whole. It can still be experienced as holistic if a participant arrives late for a meeting or departs a meeting early.
sum of these different characters. These different characters were lost as
distinctive traits in the whole (Dewey 1934, p. 38). It is my suggestion that this is
demonstrated in *Ignoramus Anonymous* through the paratextual elements that
frame the project and through the life of the ‘machine’ that the meetings
themselves become. These elements possess the individualising quality and self-
sufficiency that Dewey was talking about. They add up to more than the sum of
their parts. They accumulate into the experience of an *Ignoramus Anonymous*
meeting and the possibility of intellectual emancipation therein. They make the
experience of the project into “one of continuous movement of subject-matters”
(Dewey 1934, p. 39).

In discussing this idea further, Dewey notes the example of a painter who must be
in constant consideration of his every brushstroke, otherwise he will not be aware
of what he is doing and where his work is going. The painter needs to see each
particular connection of doing and undergoing in relation to the whole that he
desires to produce. Dewey contends that to apprehend such relations is one of the
most exacting modes of thought. He considers the difference between the pictures
of different painters as due to differences of capacity to carry out this thinking, as
much as it is to differences of sensitivity to colour and dexterity of execution.
Dewey suggests that the basic quality of pictures depends more upon the quality of
intelligence brought to bear upon perception of relations than upon anything else
(Dewey 1934, p. 47).

While the metaphor of a painter in a studio may seem a long way from a support
group, it is my contention that the intelligent awareness to make responsive
connections and form an aesthetic whole is one of the skills that I became aware
of, developed and have become able to articulate through my research. This skill is
demonstrated in the conversational craft that forms each individual meeting.

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78 Dewey is also aware, of course, that intelligence cannot be separated from direct sensitivity and is
connected, though in a more external manner, with skill (Dewey 1934, p. 47).
The Craft of Conversation in *Ignoramus Anonymous*

When individuals engage in conversation, each contribution that they make produces a change in the conversation. Schön likens such changes to the situation ‘talking back’ to the participants. The individuals listen and appreciate what is heard in this back-talk and continue to re-frame the situation for themselves (Schön 1983, pp. 131-132). What this process does for an individual is build up a repertoire of examples, images, understandings, and actions. The individual, as a practitioner of conversation, has a repertoire that includes the whole of their experience insofar as it is accessible for understanding and action (Schön 1983, p. 138).

As *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings have continued to unfold and accumulate since 2013, I have felt myself improve in the art of facilitating the events. The craft of facilitating *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings has developed as my repertoire of meetings has built up over the years. In the same way that Dewey’s painter must have built a familiarity with his materials in order to enter into a flow-like state of intuitive reflection to produce his work, so too did I build a familiarity with the context that I designed as the material of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, and the ways in which people engage and participate within it. These participants are then also the ‘material’ that I work with.

I have developed the intuition to know what to say at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, and when and how to say what needs to be said in order to keep each meeting flowing and the aesthetic experience maintained. It is the intuition of improvisational performance. I have developed this intuition by building upon the experience of each meeting into the next. I am able to make connections between topics of conversation at an individual meeting because of the repertoire of meetings and experiences I can draw upon. In this way, I can also make connections between the

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79 For a comprehensive study dedicated to conversation see *The Handbook of Conversation Analysis* (2013) by Jack Sidnell and Tanya Stivers.
topics of conversation at one individual meeting and a previous meeting and synthesise them. Creating this thread between meetings deepens the impression that Ignoramus Anonymous participants are not alone in their ignorance. This thread means that they might feel a sense of support through the connection that is made between their ignorance and the ignorance of previous participants. Because of my practice of acknowledging my own ignorance, I also possess a wealth of personal material that I can draw on to make connections at any time at any meeting. Accessing such material is part of the reflecting in action that is required in the art of conversation at Ignoramus Anonymous, to connect one topic or subject to the next, or to a previous topic or subject at a previous Ignoramus Anonymous meeting.

It is important to me that there be a willingness at Ignoramus Anonymous to follow the divergent tangents that conversations might take. In this willingness to allow conversation to organically unfold, the time will then prove right to flow into the next topic or subject when the current one has run its course. This is important at Ignoramus Anonymous because it gives the project over to the participants present for the meeting in question. Often the group will find a sense of flow, without needing to consciously consider the ‘art of conversation’ they are working with, but with my experience I can gently take the lead to keep the meeting flowing, if necessary.

To take this lead to keep an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting flowing is to make what Schön refers to as an evaluation of the reframing of situations and problem settings (Schön 1983, p. 133). As an individual, I am asking myself whether I can solve the problem I have set, to achieve that sense of holistic flow, and whether I like what I get when I feel as though I solve the problem and achieve the aesthetic experience of a culminating meeting. The feeling of inclusivity and diversity of speaking voices between those present are part of my criteria for achieving this idea of holistic flow, as is a respectful ‘turn taking’ between speaking and responding, but in equal measure there is a ‘spark’ that happens that takes the
conversation into the realm of a holistic event. This spark is more than just everyone present having their say. It is something that sparks between participants. When this happens, the conversation takes on a life of its own, and in this life a support group for ignorance has been truly realised. In the realisation of this life of the support group is the autonomous experience for participants in which they inquire into their ignorance and reflect-in-action. Schön notes that enquiry is able to keep moving through reflection-in-action when an individual is able to see an unfamiliar and unique situation as both similar to and different from a familiar one, “without first being able to say similar or different in respect to what. The familiar situation functions as a precedent, or a metaphor” (Schön 1983, p. 138). In the introductory meditation that commences an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, a metaphor that I use to function as a precedent for the event is that of “Googling information with one another”. What this serves to do is create a machine-like quality for an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting.

**Ignoramus Anonymous as a Machine**

As briefly discussed in Chapter 1, the analogy from critic Gail Priest (2014) of Ignoramus Anonymous as an analogue Google-machine maybe a little off the mark. We are not looking to retrieve information from a superior source when we make the interpersonal query of a topic for discussion at an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. Still, it serves as a useful metaphor to make the situation familiar for participants, which is why I subsequently used the reference in the opening meditation for meetings after Priest made the observation. As Schön says, when we see one situation as another situation, we are able to act in this situation as in that

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80 Such a life became part of my criteria for a ‘successful meeting’, but this is not to say that a meeting is a failure if it is dominated by some voices, marginalising others in the process. When this happens, it is a case of what I have previously referred to as “bad characters” fracturing the temporary micro-community of the project. The community can maintain a spark around these moments and these characters, or the spark can be retained when the moment has past. It is as if the bad characters are momentarily ‘ruining the game’ of Ignoramus Anonymous. The playing of the game can always be returned to, but it takes another spark of sorts to do so. The idea of the spark is something I shall come to discuss further in Chapter 6 when I turn to reconcile the idea of play in Ignoramus Anonymous.
other situation (Schön 1983, p. 139). Schön notes that the whole process of seeing-as and doing-as may proceed without conscious articulation (Schön 1983, p. 139), as in the way I was running the meetings as a search-engine without concern with retrieving information. However, I felt that a more explicit contextualisation of the meetings as if they were a sort of “post-digital” internet search-engine might help facilitate a flow of conversation and create both a holistic support group meeting and an autonomous aesthetic experience for participants.\(^8\) Leading participants to see Ignoramus Anonymous as a search-engine machine allows them to perform within the meetings as if it was such a machine. It is another case of doing things with words to do the work of the project, in generating reflection and eliciting an ignorant turn.

Post-digital art refers to projects that demonstrate “either a contemporary disenchantment with digital information systems and media gadgets, or a period in which our fascination with these systems and gadgets has become historical” (Cramer 2015, p. 13). American academic and theatre-maker Matthew Causey considers a key component of post-digital performance to be the post-internet age in which we now live. This is not a time ‘after’ the internet, but rather the permeation of an internet state of mind in which we think in the fashion of the network. In this way, a post-digital performance is “created with a consciousness of the networks within which it exists, from conception and production to dissemination and reception” (Causey 2016, p. 431). It is for this reason that I refer to Ignoramus Anonymous as a ‘post-digital internet search-engine’, because the post-digital focuses on the pervasive presence of the digital in everyday life and a sense of hybridity between the digital and the analogue. It is almost as if the digital has become the primary model of conceptualising and engaging the world, rethinking the analogue and the ‘real’ in terms of the digital and the virtual and back again (Causey 2016, p. 431). It is for this reason that likening Ignoramus Anonymous...
Anonymous to an internet search is effective in generating the artful conversation of the support groups. The point of difference in the post-digital search-engine of Ignoramus Anonymous is that we are turning away from knowledge together, and towards ignorance. Participants at Ignoramus Anonymous work together to enact the machine-like quality of the meeting, in which they do not search for knowledge but rather converse on gaps in knowledge. The work of art is conducted through the conversation of the meeting. As a machine, the project is self-sufficient and simply needs ‘turning on’ by a convener of the meeting, and this ‘turning on’ initiates the conversation that continues to do the work of the project that is initially set up through the paratexts and framing.

**Conclusion: Community Creation, Environment Interaction**

The pervasiveness of the internet in everyday life, as a way of engaging with the world and the information systems that regulate it, is a key part of the socio-cultural environment with which Ignoramus Anonymous interacts. In this chapter I have discussed how the work of this interaction is done, through the ‘doing of things with words’ in a manner that creates the temporary micro-community of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. This micro-community is brought together by an everyday aesthetic experience of antagonistic fulfillment, enabling participants to interact with each other and the socio-cultural environment around the project. The idea of interacting with that everyday environment leads to the questions driving the next chapter. In bringing about a state of wonder and reflection for Ignoramus Anonymous participants, what happens is that ignorance remains and even further abounds. While I have argued that there is a form of learning and education that takes place in this process, what remains to be discussed is the politics of this proliferation of ignorance. Such proliferation is given a close study in the field known as agnotology. In the next chapter I will situate Ignoramus Anonymous within this field. In so doing, I will focus on a new series of environments with which the project and my research interacts.
Chapter 5: Agnotology

In this chapter I consider how *Ignoramus Anonymous* might resonate within the growing field that historian Robert Proctor has termed “agnotology”. Agnotology is the study of culturally induced ignorance, a concept that emerged when Proctor realised “we are much more interested in producing knowledge than in the way society propagates ignorance” (Foucart 2011). Agnotology is a decisive shift from epistemology and the study of how we know, towards how and why we *don’t* know, which Proctor feels is just as important (Proctor 2008, p. vii). The goal of agnotology is to come to grips with how ignorance has been understood, created, and ignored, and to link these ideas to the creation of secrecy, uncertainty, confusion, silence, absence and impotence (Proctor 2008, p. vii). In this chapter, I explore the role that *Ignoramus Anonymous* might be able to play in coming to grips with these broad cultural ideas of ignorance. I do so by focusing on three diverse environments that the project and my research have interacted with: the “post-truth” world, the university classroom, and the ethics department at university. What these interactions reveal is the ways in which the production and categorisation of knowledge and ignorance is both ideological and culturally embedded, and the manner in which *Ignoramus Anonymous* might be able to combat this by turning participants into “Uncertainty Maximisers” and attempt a form of “agnometric efficacy” in the process.

To date, the concept of ignorance I have focused on is that which we do not know and understand. I need now to expand my definition to include situations wherein what we know and understand is abjectly *wrong*, and even produced by figures of authority. In the field of agnotology, new questions are raised for my research. The first is: can the ignorant turn of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting still constitute a form of intellectual emancipation given the post-truth world that has emerged over the course of my research?
Post-Truth

In George Orwell’s novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1977), first published in 1949, one of the slogans of Big Brother and The Party is “Ignorance is strength”. The slogan is used to stultify and infantalise the public, and to maintain power over them by blinding them to the truth. For Orwell, the slogan acted as a satirical device critiquing totalitarianism. During the period of my research, I have often reflected that satire such as Orwell’s never quite went far enough. The world has since shifted into an environment of “post-truth”, “fake news” and “alternative facts”, for which *Nineteen Eighty-Four* could be viewed as foreshadowing a recognisable reality.

“Alternative facts” entered our lexicon in 2016 when White House press secretary Sean Spicer claimed that president Donald Trump’s inauguration was witnessed by the largest audience in history, a statement that was demonstrably false when compared to former president Barack Obama’s 2009 inauguration. In response, senior aide to the president, Kellyanne Conway defended Spicer, saying he had not provided a falsehood but rather “gave alternative facts” (d’Ancona 2017). “Fake news”, rather obviously, consists of disinformation in all forms of news and social media, and has been popularised by Trump in his use of the term to describe any negative press coverage of his presidency.

Alternative facts and fake news are examples of a more broadly pervasive “post-truth world”. Writing for *The Guardian*, journalist Matthew d’Ancona describes a world in which there is an increased emphasis on emotional resonance over facts and evidence, and verification is replaced with social media algorithms that tell us what we want to hear. In lieu of this, truth loses its value as the reserve currency of society, and scepticism yields to pernicious relativism. What is new is not necessarily the mendacity of this situation, but the public’s response to it (d’Ancona 2017). The rise of the anti-vaccination movement is an example of one such response, for which scientific evidence proves no match for emotionalism and
the charisma of celebrity. An instance of this can be observed in 2007 when media personality Jenny McCarthy asserted her “Mommy instinct” over the scientific establishment. On live television, she cited her autistic son as her scientific evidence for the problems with vaccination, noting that she received her degree from “The University of Google” (d’Ancona 2017). The idea of post-truth can also be observed in the 2016 Brexit campaign, wherein British Conservative politician Michael Gove suggested that the country had rightly “had enough of experts” and should put their intuitive faith in their own feelings and judgments (rpmackey 2016). The rise of a post-truth world is a rise of ignorance being sold as strength, and it began to bear a troubling likeness to my own advocacy for an active turn towards ignorance. In such a world, could empowerment and intellectual emancipation still result from the ignorant turn of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting?

Technological advances during this period could also be a cause for this observable proliferation of ignorance, because in the resultant “information explosion” brought about by technology there has been a simultaneous “ignorance explosion” (Proctor 2008, p. 6). Indeed, doctors have often complained that the internet has digitally turbo-charged false science (d’Ancona 2017). In the case of the rise of another post-truth movement, that of people who believe the Earth is flat, astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson puts this down to the protection of free speech and a failed education system that “needs to train you not only what to know but how to think about information and knowledge and evidence” (Segarra
A denial of what one does not want to believe is at the heart of this form of ignorance.

With the growth of a post-truth world and an ‘ignorance explosion’ during the period of my PhD research, it occurred to me that maybe I shouldn’t be encouraging people to turn towards and accept their ignorance. Then again, with such a proliferation of ignorance, maybe Ignoramus Anonymous was now more necessary than ever? Reflecting upon the flip side of turning towards ignorance led me to consider whether such a turn could become another form of subjugation rather than intellectual emancipation and empowerment. To deepen this reflection, I now turn to discuss Ignoramus Anonymous in relation to agnotology.

**Agnotology and Ignoramus Anonymous**

Agnotology is the study of ignorance making. It encompasses knowledge that should be but isn’t (perhaps through the circulation of fake news), and knowledge that could have been but wasn’t (perhaps because of an ethics committee). However, agnotology also reveals that not all ignorance is bad. A right to privacy is one such positive form of ignorance making, as it is essentially a right to conceal personal knowledge and information from another party. Irving Goffman illustrates that “many important kinds of social interactions and arrangements...
would be impossible without some unshared perceptions, secrecy, and even deception by the participants” (Proctor 2008, p. 218).

Studies in agnotology stem from the idea that a great deal of attention has been given to epistemology, the study of how we know, whereas how or why we don’t know is often just as important and remarkably undertheorised (Proctor 2008, p. vii). Proctor, who introduced the field of agnotology, quotes novelist Thomas Pynchon to note a need for this area of study. Pynchon feels that we need agnotology studies because we are often unaware of the scope and structure of our ignorance. Ignorance is not just a blank space on a person’s mental map. It has contours and coherence, and for all I know rules of operation as well. So as a corollary to writing about what we know, maybe we should add getting familiar with our ignorance (Proctor 2008, p. 1).

To get familiar with ignorance, Proctor edited the definitive compendium on the subject, Agnotology: The Making and Unmaking of Ignorance (2008). In the publication he notes that there must be as many kinds of ignorance as knowledge. In fact, given how scant our knowledge is compared to the vastness of our ignorance, there might even be more. He breaks these kinds of ignorance down into three cursory distinctions: ignorance as native state or resource, ignorance as lost realm or selective choice, and ignorance as a deliberately engineered and strategic ploy or active construct (Proctor 2008, p. 3). In the third distinction, Proctor warns that “ignorance should not be viewed as a simple omission or gap, but rather an active production” (Proctor 2008, p. 9). This is the post-truth arena of fake news and alternative facts, wherein ignorance can be actively engineered as part of a deliberate plan. Proctor’s biggest example of this is the tobacco industry, which he considers the master of fomenting ignorance to combat knowledge (Proctor 2008, p. 11). Another noteworthy example can be observed in climate science. Indeed, historians Naomi Oreskes and Erik M. Conway make a significant connection between the denial of manmade global warming and the denial of the scientific evidence that smoking causes cancer (Oreskes & Conway 2008, p. 74). In
the case of both manmade global warming and cancer caused by smoking, the same researchers, led by a Dr. Frederick Sietz, used the same tactics to develop arguments that confound the causal links. The researchers firstly emphasised epidemiological uncertainties and biochemical complexities in the proof that tobacco causes cancer. This emphasis on uncertainty and complexity subsequently characterised similar efforts by Sietz and many of the same individuals to challenge scientific anthropogenic global warming, in effect, to deliberately manufacture ignorance (Oreskes & Conway 2008, p. 68).

Such research is an example of steps taken to keep the public in the dark, because, as Proctor says: “We rule you, if we can fool you” (Proctor 2008, p. 11). Ignorance is strength, in the sense of both the Orwellian ruse of Big Brother and of the popular idiom that it is “bliss”, but it is a different sort of ignorance and strength that I advocate with Ignoramus Anonymous. What we find together at Ignoramus Anonymous is the recognition of ignorance. At Ignoramus Anonymous, ignorance takes steps out from the dark and into the light. In this way, Ignoramus Anonymous is able to constitute another agnotological study of the contours and coherence of ignorance.

Ignoramus Anonymous involves tapping into the ignorance that is our native state and resource for learning and for developing knowledge. Through the support group meetings, attendees recognise the fact that we can never know everything, and it also becomes palpable how debilitating it would be if we were to pay too much attention to our ignorance. It has often been remarked at meetings that a person couldn’t function in everyday life if they focused too much on their ignorance. I believe that this is part of the reason that the meetings are thought to be so refreshing: they provide a temporary channel to give our ignorance some focus and reflection. In this way, we also touch on ignorance as lost realm or

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84 Oreskes and Conway believe that a motive for engaging Sietz can be found in the way that tobacco regulation, banning of CFCs, delay of controls on CO2 emissions each constitute an expression of a radical free market ideology that opposes any kind of restriction on the pursuit of market capitalism, no matter the justification (Oreskes & Conway 2008, pp. 76-77).
selective choice at *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This is done in the way that ignorance is responsively revealed to participants in the form of knowledge that has been lost, when attendees realise that they *used to know* something, and in confessions of wilful ignorance that participants choose to live with.\(^8\)

The ignorance that is revealed and recognised at an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting is what the project throws up for study. Psychology researcher Michael J. Smithson suggests that in agnotological studies we are almost inevitably confronted with prescriptive questions regarding how people should deal with ignorance. He feels that one way to address such prescriptions is through a cross-disciplinary approach that is not merely limited to the rational but also encompasses moral philosophy to consider, for example, when and why ignorance might prove to be virtuous (Smithson 2008, p. 225). In Smithson’s discipline of psychology, two contrasting orientations regarding how people deal with the unknown are that of the ‘Knowledge Seeker’ and ‘Certainty Maximiser’, and they are worth considering in relation to my *Ignoramus Anonymous* agnotology.

**‘Knowledge Seeker’ vs. ‘Certainty Maximiser’**

According to Smithson, the ‘Knowledge Seeker’ is the person who seeks novel information and experience, and is open to full and honest communication in this process. They can tolerate uncertainty and even ignorance in the short run in order to gain knowledge, and are not defensive about prior beliefs. The ‘Certainty Maximiser’, on the other hand, is greatly concerned about the debilitating consequences of uncertainty, unpredictability and uncontrollability for the affective, cognitive and physiological capabilities brought about by the unknown.

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\(^8\) Psychology researcher Michael J. Smithson notes a number of examples of willful ignorance, which highlight the cultural and motivational stock from which people fashion decisions about when to know and when to remain ignorant. These examples include the low uptake on genetic marker tests for individuals with hereditary risk of life-threatening diseases, and more “positive” examples such as surprise gift giving, avoiding spoilers for movies (to maintain the pleasurable quality of that aesthetic experience), and in *playing* games (Smithson 2008, p. 219). In Chapter 6, I will return to the idea of play necessarily taking place in a state of ignorance.
Emotion-based theories and research into learning and adaption conclude that anxiety can be a result of uncertainty for the ‘Certainty Maximiser’ (Smithson 2008, p. 216). Consequently, there is a natural tension between these two orientations, but they are both underpinned by the assumption that ignorance is to be reduced (or banished altogether) by gaining knowledge. Smithson argues that there is an unexplored set of linkages between ignorance and knowledge in terms of such emotional responses, moral assessments, and their legitimation (Smithson 2008, p. 217). My Ignoramus Anonymous research tackles these unexplored linkages between ignorance and knowledge through the social work of providing support for ignorance through a support group, which isn’t directly looking to reduce or banish ignorance but to recognise it. In this way, Ignoramus Anonymous explores what Smithson considers the largely unexplored trade-offs and dilemmas in the interplay between knowledge and ignorance, in such a way that one is not merely a mirror image of the other (Smithson 2008, p. 225).

Confronting the inevitable lack of understanding and knowledge is a humbling learning experience. This experience, of facing how truly little we know, can characterise the beginning of a transformative turn. The transformation of this turn is not only the shattering of personal hubris. The turn also releases an awareness of how little it is possible to know in life, and as such how little everyone else knows as well. The gaining of this personal insight through a support group for ignorance could in itself be seen as the discovery of knowledge in the sense that “unknown unknowns” are made into “known unknowns”. Such a taxonomy of ignorance coincides with Smithson’s articulation of the most popular distinction when it comes to ignorance as “knowing that we don’t know and not knowing that we don’t know” (Smithson 2008, p. 210).

86 Smithson’s example of this is in the way ignorance can be used by the ignoramus as a justification for evading culpability or responsibility. In a similar way that education and knowledge transmission is often a moralising process, the same can often be said for arrangements of ignorance such as secrecy, privacy and the protection of innocence. Smithson thinks that the exploration of these linkages should not be limited to psychology, but suggests that the discipline is well equipped to undertake certain parts of this task (Smithson 2008, p. 217).

87 Smithson prefers the terms “conscious ignorance” and “meta-ignorance” (Smithson 2008, p. 210), which suggests that known unknowns are preferable to unknown unknowns because the awareness of an individual of their ignorance means that at least there is a limit to that particular ignorance.
we sit with these rising questions and the growing revelation of how little we know, as “unknown unknowns” continually fluctuate into “known unknowns”.

In Chapter 1, I suggested, following Carl Sagan, that it is only children who do not know enough to avoid stopping to ask really clever questions. Now, imagine the humorous situation wherein a child might continue to ask “Why?” in response to every answer an adult provides to their original question. In this situation, the adult is increasingly confronted with his or her own ignorance as what is raised continues to feed back into the conversation. Every piece of knowledge drawn upon to answer the pesky child will only require more knowledge for clarification and confirmation, to a farcically infinite degree. Barthes makes the observation that writing is made up of a ready-formed dictionary of words that are only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely (Barthes 1977, p. 146).

Similarly, an understanding of one particular subject only exists in its interplay with the understanding of other subjects, in such a way as to never rest on any of them, and suggests that conveying the understanding of any subject “can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original” (Barthes 1977, p. 146). Such a notion becomes palpable in the context of a child’s questions, which is analogous with the intention of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. We continue to question each other, devolving the capacity for explication, overthrowing intellectual mastery, and exposing uncertainty in the process. Our “questions alone will be true questions compelling the autonomous exercise of [our] intelligence” (Rancière 1991, 30) because we have admitted our ignorance. The temporary micro-community that gathers, sit with the very ignorance that is revealed in one another. Such ignorance does not come about through the biased research,

88 This is rhetoric adopted from former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a US Department of Defense News Briefing in 2002 (Rumsfeld 2002). In the now infamous briefing, Rumsfeld acknowledged that the unknown unknowns were the most difficult category.

89 Participant Jennifer Medway recalled that when asked, no one at the meeting she attended knew more than the first verse of the national anthem and that this revealed a collective ignorance that brought the group together (Medway 2019). A recurring question I would ask the group was why they believed the Earth was round and revolved around the sun, instead of being a flat disc supported on the back of a giant turtle. Could they adequately explain one position over the other? This provocation became somewhat problematic during my research with the aforementioned resurgence of a global community who believe that the Earth is indeed flat after all.
alternative facts or fake news of a post-truth world. Instead, small groups of people make a point of acknowledging what they don’t know rather than valorising what they do know. There is a transparency regarding what is happening in terms of the collective turn towards ignorance together. Consequently, intellectual emancipation remains possible.

Once again, a question remains regarding the efficacy of the project. In this case that efficacy regards the measurement of ignorance. It is tempting to think that if ignorance is revealing itself from the dark, going from unknown unknown to known unknown, then it might be measurable in some way. However: can ignorance be measured as knowledge can? I suggest that transparently and knowingly turning towards ignorance is perhaps the first step, but what should then happen next? How might the knowledge that is born from an ignorant turn be measured and valued? Is it possible to measure ignorance if it is infinite? Why might it be desirable to measure ignorance in the first place?

**Hubristic Agnometrics**

Proctor suggests that we need better measures of all these kinds of ignorance. He thinks that “agnometric indicators” might be useful to tell us how many people don’t know x or y or z (Proctor 2008, p. 16). At one point the Waverley Council Library tried to instrumentalise *Ignoramus Anonymous* to reveal what they could help the community with. They asked me to send reports of what was discussed at a series of meetings, thinking that they might be able to observe trends and arrange book displays according to the ignorance of the local community. It didn’t work. The conversations generated by the meetings simply did not translate into a written report that was of any use.\footnote{For an example of one of these email ‘reports’, which I believe demonstrates the failed instrumentalisation of the project, please refer to page 49 the appendix of this exegesis.} The project teased at possessing a form of instrumentality for the council, but was simply unquantifiable in terms of a use
An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance

value for them. It was an example in practice of the Rancièrian tension I have previously discussed, for which Bishop also advocates, of art to be at one remove from instrumental rationality. In the failed instrumentalisation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* by Waverley Council Library, not to mention the initial difficulties in orchestrating a school of ignorance through my residency, *Ignoramus Anonymous* reveals how difficult such an agnometric task is to implement. Still, through becoming simultaneously Knowledge Seekers and Uncertainty Maximisers, *Ignoramus Anonymous* participants become aware of their expanding ignorance outside of their bubbles of knowledge and understanding, and this awareness expands what is inside the respective bubbles as well. As Proctor says, there is surely quite a lot of this ignorance, “as much as we are willing to let our arrogance acknowledge. Agnotology could be a challenge to hubris, if there is modesty in learning how ignorant we are” (Proctor 2008, p. 26).

*Ignoramus Anonymous* is certainly a hubristic challenge for participants, in the sense that the pride and self-confidence that constitutes hubris takes a hit. In these revelations and the encouragement to sit with ignorance, there is both the process of becoming familiar with ignorance that Pynchon thinks would be useful and a sense of training in how to think about information and knowledge that deGrasse Tyson believes is necessary in education. Indeed, there are connections between *Ignoramus Anonymous*, agnotology and a broad range of thinkers throughout history. Most famous perhaps is the idea of Socratic ignorance, in which the character of Socrates in Plato’s *Apology* (399BC) recognises that his wisdom stems from ignorance, and that it is through conversation that he achieves this realisation. However, even before Plato and Socrates, Chinese teacher and philosopher Confucious (551BC - 479BC) had the motto that “real knowledge is to know the extent of one’s ignorance” (Proctor 2008, p. 28). Much later, in the 16th Century, renaissance-era mathematician and astronomer Nicolaus Copernicus

In hindsight I wonder about the ethics of divulging the ignorance of participants to the local council. Would this have constituted a microform of data harvesting like that which Cambridge Analytica conducted of Facebook users?
suggested that “[t]o know that we don’t know what we know, and to know that we do not know what we do not know, that is true knowledge” (Proctor 2008, p. 28). 20th Century American philosopher Will Durant said that “[e]ducation is a progressive discovery of our own ignorance” (Proctor 2008, p. 29). These lines of thinking on ignorance abound throughout history, and the perpetual latency of this thinking is part of the reason why Proctor believed it was time that ignorance was taken to be a field of study in its own right.

*Ignoramus Anonymous* is able to enter the field of agnotology to combat the trivialised fashion in which ignorance is seen as something in need of correction, a kind of natural absence or void where knowledge has not yet spread. Like agnotology, *Ignoramus Anonymous* reveals ignorance to be more than a void, not always a bad thing, and even necessary in order to spread knowledge. No one needs or wants to know everything all the time, but there often feels to be a pressure placed upon the individual to know and understand more than they do (Proctor 2008, p. 2). Either that, or the likes of Michael Gove are subtly but nefariously encouraging the public to not feel this pressure and turn away from trying to understand experts, and essentially accept their ignorance and place their faith in politicians like him.

The post-truth world is yet another context in which *Ignoramus Anonymous* does the work that I have been discussing. The project helps participants find strength in ignorance by encouraging and supporting a discomforting turn towards what they do not know and understand, and there is learning involved in this process. In the post-truth world there is the abolition of ignorance, in which ignorance is reframed as subjective truth for the individual, whereas *Ignoramus Anonymous* strives to avoid the drive for such abolition and make it ok not to know. I observed

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92 The term agnotology was actually coined by linguist Iain Boal, at the commission of Proctor. It derives from the two linguistic forms of ignorance in Greek: agnoia, meaning “want of perception or knowledge”, and agnosia, meaning a state a state of ignorance or not-knowing, both from gnosia, meaning “knowledge”, with a negating a- prefix, and –ology as the denominative suffix (Proctor 2008, p. 27).
what I felt was a need to support one another in our ignorance through dialogue, which began with a hunch during my Waverley Council residency. This hunch became increasingly transparent when I became a casual teacher of art theory and practice at the University of Wollongong during my PhD, and the university classroom became another environment with which Ignoramus Anonymous interacted.

**University Teaching**

The majority of students that I teach at university come direct from a “banking model” (Freire 1970) of high-school education, where students typically raise their hand to contribute in class when they do know the answer rather than when they don’t. It is easy to imagine that this contributes to the sort of stigma of ignorance that I then encounter in students at university. Class discussions are often monopolised by the confident students who feel as though they understand the material. Meanwhile those who seem to not understand the material appear to feel a sense of shame or vulnerability, and consequently do not contribute as much to class discussions and inhibit their own learning process. The research of David Dunning and Justin Kruger illuminates the relationship between such confident students and their feeling of understanding. They conclude that Charles Darwin was right in his observation that ignorance more frequently begets confidence than does knowledge. This is because “the same knowledge that underlies the ability to produce correct judgment is also the knowledge that underlies the ability to recognise correct judgment. To lack the former is to be deficient in the latter” (Kruger & Dunning 1999, pp. 1121-1122). Consequently, an individual’s ignorance often propagates their overconfidence, and this has become known as the ‘Dunning Kruger Effect’. In the case of the confidence of a student who feels as though they understand but is actually off the mark, this can lead to their learning and development through their involvement in the discussion of ideas, but only if they become aware of their ignorance and the limits of their understanding. As Dunning and Kruger note, however, such awareness is hard to bring about in the
overconfident because of a deficit in metacognitive skills. “[T]he same incompetence that leads them to make wrong choices, also deprives them of the savvy necessary to recognise competence, be it their own or anyone else’s” (Kruger & Dunning 1999, p. 1126).

To counter the feelings of vulnerability in university students, and as an expansion of my PhD research, I began to experiment with my tutorials in a similar manner to Ignoramus Anonymous meetings. Tables were removed from the classroom and we all sat together in a circle of chairs, in what I would refer to as a “support group” for the weekly readings and lectures. I would dispense with the introductory meditation and instead commence tutorials with the fielding of questions from the group that remain after undertaking the reading and attending the lecture. It was my thinking that in this classroom support group circle, as in an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, we have to sit with our vulnerability with the group. In doing so, a connection can be made with a temporary micro-community.

The deconstruction of vulnerability to find connections between people is at the heart of the work of researcher Brené Brown. Brown suggests that shame and fear prevent connections we can make between one another. She advocates for individuals to take the courage to be imperfect and lean into discomfort by finding a willingness to be vulnerable (Brown 2011). A willingness to say, for example, “I don’t know”. For Brown, vulnerability is at the core of shame, fear and a struggle for worthiness, but it is also the birthplace of joy, creativity, belonging and love (Brown 2011). I would add that it is also the birthplace of learning and education, and that Ignoramus Anonymous is a context that facilitates this willingness. A therapy session is another example of such a context. A classroom should be yet another example, but more often is not. Based on my classroom experience of running university tutorials, I recognise that there are a number of reasons for this.

93 My reason for dispensing with the meditation was that it felt somehow inappropriate given the context specificity of the university classroom.

Firstly, there is the Dunning Kruger Effect, wherein confident students are blind to their ignorance and feel a sense of confidence rather than vulnerability as a result. They are something of an equivalent to the “bad characters” at an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting. Then there is the fact that the university tutorial is compulsory, and many are perhaps not actually interested in being there (even though they may have chosen to enrol in the subject). This is part of the institutional context that I cannot contend with, and which runs counter to the voluntary nature of attending an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting. The democratizing essence of the *Ignoramus Anonymous* context struggles to be maintained within this institutional context of university, which actively ranks students by giving them a grade. Such a culture suggests that it is not acceptable to be vulnerably ignorant, because your job as a student is to receive good grades by ‘knowing things’. As per the banking model of high-school education, there is the feeling that these ‘things’ should be deposited into their knowledge bank by their superior teacher. What a shock these students then receive when no such deposits are made, and as the teacher I instead focus on conversing with them on the underlying theories and concepts of the weekly topics that they don’t understand, and have them converse with each other and try to tease out connections with what they do know and understand. In the process, I encourage them to form and articulate their own position and understanding that they can take into their emerging arts practices, based on these theories and concepts.

Unfortunately, because of the conditioning performed by the banking model of education, it can often be difficult for students to sit with the difficulty and vulnerability of not-knowing, and work through this to come to their own knowledge and understanding, even with my support and guidance. The increasing accessibility of information means that young students will immediately turn to their smartphone for an answer, rather than sit with the difficulty and vulnerability of not-knowing. They don’t want it to be difficult and they don’t want to feel vulnerable. For writer, teacher and critic Tegan Bennett Daylight, this
difficulty is precisely the point of the arts and humanities subjects that we teach. However, the logic of the university consumer system encourages the misapprehension that the process should be always enticing and involve the easy spoon-fed depositing of information (Bennett Daylight 2017).

Nevertheless, I would concede that part of my job as a teacher is to entice the students to engage with complexity, difficulty and vulnerability. Further research is required to explore how my Ignoramus Anonymous methodology might be utilised to do this and be effectively translated to a classroom context. However, one existing example of how such enticement can be embedded in university teaching practice can be observed in the education software Review. Review is a digital portal in which students submit their assignments at some universities. As part of this submission process students are asked to grade themselves against the assessment criteria for the assignment. This self-assessment is withheld from the marker, but if the student’s grading and the marker’s grading match then the student receives additional marks (Thompson 2017). This self-assessment process is akin to the way Dunning and Kruger conducted their research. Dunning and Kruger had a series of groups sit a series of exams and self-assess on their results. What they found was that students who rated themselves most highly tended to receive poorer results, leading to the conclusion that ignorance propagates overconfidence (Kruger & Dunning 1999). The Review software provides transparency and actively encourages and incentivises students to do the uncomfortable work of reflecting on both their understanding and ignorance regarding the task at hand. It is no easy thing to do, and the students are not alone in their shying away from the discomfiting contours of their ignorance and what it might take to turn this ignorance into knowledge. The ethics processes at university can also present the possibility of preventing the production of new knowledge based on perceived potential discomfort. It could be said that in some

95 For more on the Review software see Thompson (2017).
96 Of course, students using the Review software might know they have submitted a poor assessment, and even deliberately do so, and hope to possibly bluff the marker. Or the student might have an alternative understanding of the marking criteria, or the marker might possibly be biased against them.
circumstances, what both the university students and the university ethics departments are doing in avoiding discomfort is actively *perpetuating ignorance*.

**University Ethics**

In order to conduct the necessary conversations with participants to tease out the lines of enquiry in my research for this PhD, I required approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee. Approval from the committee is based on a perceived beneficence of my ethical practice as a researcher, in which “the likely benefits of the research must justify any risks of harm or discomfort to the participants, to the wider community, or to both” (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007, p. 13). Approval is then based on whether the proposed method is likely to cause harm.

Artist and scholar Barbara Bolt investigates the emergence of a conflicting understanding of beneficence between contemporary artists and artistic researchers and the principle of beneficence enshrined in *The National Statement on Ethical Conduct of Research Involving Humans* (2007), which is the code of behaviour that underpins the ethical conduct of research within Australian universities. Bolt notes that this National Statement defines beneficence as the minimisation of harm and discomfort to research participants, but that artists are often interested in a form of beneficence that might necessarily incorporate provocation and discomfort in order to illuminate important ethical issues of our time. When such artists, myself included, make a turn towards the academy and undertake higher degree research, questions are raised regarding the ethical stakes involved in producing possibly discomforting art as research. What are the challenges for artistic researchers working in the academy and what are the issues for the ethics committees that have oversight over artistic research? (Bolt 2015, p. 55).
If research is shied away from because, for example, the method could cause discomfort, then it has been deemed by the ethics committee to not be worth the risk to undertake the research to produce this new knowledge. It can be inferred that the Human Research Ethics Committee are saying that we are better off remaining ignorant about what knowledge could have emerged from the research. This is one of the reasons that Proctor believes that “ignorance should not be viewed as a simple omission or gap, but rather an active production” because “ignorance can be an actively engineered part of a deliberate plan” (Proctor 2008, p. 9). He considers a further instance of ignorance making (or maintenance) to be brought about by moral resistance and caution (Proctor 2008, p. 9). Proctor notes an example of such virtuous ignorance relating to research ethics, which “presumes that ignorance in certain situations is preferable to knowledge by improper means” (Proctor 2008, p. 21). Furthermore, if the research might produce knowledge that could be biased or undesirable, then we are better off remaining in the dark about it (Proctor 2008, p. 21).

Obviously, ignorance in certain situations is preferable to knowledge by improper means, especially if that knowledge might be biased, unreliable or cause harm. However, Bolt suggests that with an allegiance to the notion of dissensus, an artistic researcher may hold a different understanding of beneficence altogether to that which is embodied in *The National Statement*. For example, the artist’s research might be underpinned by the idea that the beneficence of art lies precisely in the capacity to *create* discomfort, rather than minimise discomfort. Consequently, Bolt argues that the speculative and provocative nature of art (and art as research) enables an ethical debate with the capacity to illuminate some of the critical ethical issues of our age. Bolt raises the question, not as to whether it is ethical to create dissensus but whether in some cases it is ethical *not to do so* (Bolt 2015, p. 64). She notes that the possibility of harm can be an unavoidable part of the research process and that to judiciously eliminate such possibilities from research projects, “apart from being impossible, would produce a situation where research becomes neutered; inadequate to address the complex issues that face us.
living in the world” (Bolt 2015, p. 64). I would add that for artist researchers there is the further possibility of neutering not just the research but also the art itself.

When I sought approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee to undertake the necessary conversations with participants to tease out the Ignoramus Anonymous experience, a problem was raised based on my desire to conceal the frames of art and research from Ignoramus Anonymous meetings. The ethics committee considered such concealment to be tantamount to deception, and that it was not clear what would result from any potential discomfort to participants. Consequently, the design of my research did not align with their strict protocols of beneficence: that research should minimise the risks of harm or discomfort to participants, and that participants should be informed of the potential benefits and risks of the research in advance (National Health and Medical Research Council 2007, p. 13). Part of my difficulty in addressing this problem was that I was unsure of the potential benefits of my research through Ignoramus Anonymous from the outset. Part of the point of my research was to get to the bottom of the work the project does, and herein lies the dilemma of such research for Bolt. In the performative act of artistic practice-based research, it can be hard to imagine what may happen given the exploratory nature of the endeavor. In the context of such research, it is difficult to ask in advance whether it should happen since it is only through it actually happening that the point of the research will truly emerge. Consequently, bringing an audience into a state of discomfort and depriving them of information regarding the nature of the research, is an ethical problem in academia (Bolt 2015, p. 59). Nevertheless, I was able to come to

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97 A primary focus for Bolt’s consideration of these issues is the work of my colleagues Amy Spiers and Catherine Ryan, Nothing to See Here (Dispersal) (2014). The work involves the appropriation of crowd dispersal techniques used by the police as a form of choreography in which to forcibly direct, herd, divide, expel and corral a theatre audience within a performance. For Bolt, this means that Spiers and Ryan chose not just to produce a performance that illustrated a sense of unease, but rather one that provoked and enacted unease and discomfort in its audience (Bolt 2015, p. 55). Whilst it is not my direct intention to provoke the extremity of discomfort and unease with Ignoramus Anonymous as is the aim of Spiers and Ryan in their work, both projects were inspired by a critical reading of Rancière, and for both Spiers and myself, our respective projects simultaneously constituted academic research.
an agreement with the Human Research Ethics Committee to ‘back-announce’ the research I was conducting through Ignoramus Anonymous to participants in attendance. This involved disclosing my research at the end of each meeting, at which point I would also ask participants for feedback and reflections on their experience of the project. This allowed for a genuine response to the experience, as well as enabling the art/not-art duality and potential discomfort of the project to remain.

The potential discomfort of Ignoramus Anonymous initially results from the reframing of the ‘real’ that constitutes a Rancièrian dissensus. As previously discussed, the efficacy of dissensus requires the slippery results of a conflict between a sensory presentation and a making sense of it to be reconciled. As I have argued, “things are done with words” in order to do the work of this “making sense” for the public. This doing of things with words creates a reframed real in which there is a new relationship between reality and appearance (Rancière 2010, pp. 147-149). In so doing, Ignoramus Anonymous builds a world of discomforting dissensus and asks participants to sit in this world as a space of play. The ‘play’ of the support group elicits the discomforting turn towards ignorance, which I shall discuss further in the next chapter. In eliciting this turn, I was initially dealing with simply the intuitive ethical beneficence of my art practice, but then had to also negotiate the conditions for ethical conduct of academic research. For artist researchers within the academy, this concern has ramifications for the idea of the ‘new knowledge’ that our research might produce, or more specifically: the new knowledge we might remain ignorant of in neutering possible discomfort in practice-based research by artists. As Proctor notes, such gatekeeping of potential knowledge perpetuates ignorance by keeping us in the dark regarding that knowledge.
Conclusion: The Hubris in Becoming ‘Uncertainty Maximisers’

In this chapter I have sought to demonstrate the ways in which *Ignoramus Anonymous* is an example of the cross-disciplinary approach to agnotology that Smithson advocates. The utilisation of my discipline of socially engaged live-art to further consider social theories around ignorance demonstrates the way that “many disciplines can benefit from one another in studying ignorance, as long as specialists attempt to understand other disciplines’ viewpoint with a certain amount of Quine-like charity” (Proctor 2008, p. 226). As the artist who provides the context of *Ignoramus Anonymous* as a research project, I have drawn upon the disciplines of pedagogy and philosophy to explore what might be revealed about ignorance in the way that *Ignoramus Anonymous* has interacted with the university classroom and ethics committee, and the post-truth world that has emerged throughout the period of my PhD. Through these interactions, certain contours of ignorance are revealed.

In closing, it is necessary to recognise, as Proctor does, that “knowledge grows out of ignorance, as a flower from honest soil”, hence the necessity for an academic study of ignorance, such as that which *Ignoramus Anonymous* provides. Based on my experience with the project, however, I disagree with Proctor’s assertion that knowledge grows out of ignorance in a “pretty much one way” fashion (Proctor 2008, p. 4). Ignorance might be the *prompt* for knowledge, insofar as we are constantly striving to destroy it, fact by fact (Proctor 2008, p. 4), but the experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous* reveals how intertwined knowledge and ignorance are with one another. Ignorance and knowledge constitute one another, in the sense that they are binary dichotomies that are incomplete without one another. Whilst knowledge is a flower that can grow from the soil of ignorance,

<sup>98</sup> ‘Quine-like’, in this case, is a common noun that stems from American philosopher and logician Williard Van Orman Quine, and means to “repudiate a clear distinction” (Lehmann-Haupt 2000) between one’s own discipline and the discipline they are intersecting with. In this sense, the research methodology of my intellectual adventure can be observed as rather ‘Quine-like’ as well.
ignorance is also a flower that can grow from the soil of knowledge. This is evidenced in the regenerative power of ignorance that makes research sustainable, as new questions continue to arise (Proctor 2008, p. 5). Indeed, this has been the precise experience of my own research through *Ignoramus Anonymous*. In the final chapter, I will return to the initial questions of my research and discuss my methodologies as artistic activities of play, including further discussion of the way that play collapses binaries such as knowledge and ignorance.
Chapter 6: A (Re)Turn to Play

In this final chapter I turn back to the starting point of my research. Having discussed *Ignoramus Anonymous* in terms of the work it does and how that work is done, I move on to reconciling the project with that which is commonly thought to be the opposite of work: *play*. I look at the ways in which play can facilitate the processes of art-making, performing and pedagogy within *Ignoramus Anonymous*. In terms of art-making, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung once wrote that without play, “no creative work has ever yet come to birth” (Burkeman 2018, p. 22).

When it comes to education, there is an extensive range of analysis on the pedagogical capacities of play (Groos 1901; Meares 1992; Shlomo 2002; Henig 2008). However, I will consider *Ignoramus Anonymous* primarily through the thinking of historian Johan Huizinga. Huizinga believed that a pedagogical analysis of play uses the quantitative methods of science, “without first paying attention to its profoundly aesthetic quality” (Huizinga 1949, p. 2). In his seminal work *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture* (1949), Huizinga articulates a rich consideration of play as the process of creation for not only the arts and new knowledge, but for culture as a whole, because play in fact “is older than culture” (Huizinga 1949, p. 1). I will extend this aesthetic consideration of play through my *Ignoramus Anonymous* research by suggesting that to say “I don’t know” is to say “I don’t know” is to be at play. To say “I don’t know” is to make things happen through words. Through *Ignoramus Anonymous* those things happen through the collective wondering that follows this statement. The wondering sets the play in motion and brings about the possibility of emancipation, education, art-making and community-forming.

It is logical that this chapter on play follows the previous succession of chapters on work. Curator Helen Molesworth notes that “no discussion of work can be maintained for very long without registering the concept of play” (Molesworth 2003, p. 192). Molesworth asks whether we work in order to play, or play as a respite from work. She asks whether the toil of working is the existential condition of humankind, or whether the freedom of play is our true nature (Molesworth...
These questions lead me to wonder whether such a dichotomy can be reconciled by an artist, where the toil of work is play and the frolic of play is work. Molesworth draws on the thesis of Huizinga, arguing that true play contains elements of chance and non-seriousness, and most importantly, is a completely voluntary activity. Play cannot be a task or a duty, but is rather a release from these powerful societal motivators and an instance of freedom because of the agency an individual takes on when they choose to play (Molesworth 2003, p. 192). In this agency is the possibility of a process of emancipation from existing hierarchical restrictions. This is because, as Huizinga argues, play belongs to a magic circle where a temporary world exists outside normal rules and regulations. In this play-world, you can pretend that things are the way they are not: a stick can become a sword or a child can be an astronaut conversing with an alien life-form (Ryall 2018, p. 51). In this play-world, a support group for ignorance can come into being. Herein lies a problem that needs to be addressed. For in play, there is no immediate concern for outcome (Ryall 2018, p. 51). Play is more concerned with the present than with the future. Yet, throughout this exegesis, I have articulated the outcomes for *Ignoramus Anonymous*. The support group meetings have both the intrinsic value that play is thought to possess and the instrumental value that work provides.

As previously discussed, the outcome of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting can be viewed in terms of implementing the possibility of intellectual emancipation, and a freedom from the facade of knowledgeability that there is the pressure to maintain in life, lest you risk your status and the possibility of embarrassment. Regarding embarrassment, it is worth noting again the work of Australian artist Stuart Ringholt, previously mentioned in Chapter 2. Ringholt’s ‘Naturist Tours’ are part of his practice that has been observed to be cathartic in nature (Harvey 2009). There seems a particular fixation on catharsis from embarrassment for Ringholt, with works ranging from these naked tours of galleries to workshops designed to rid

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99 Of course this agency is always mediated by the autonomous rules that govern the play in question.
participants of embarrassment by living through the moment in a safe environment. Such projects have much in common with *Ignoramus Anonymous*; in the way they both appropriate social forms and do so towards rather pragmatic goals, of dealing with embarrassment for Ringholt and ignorance for myself. Along with Ringholt, Canadian performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex regularly utilises a sense of play and existing social forms to tackle social anxieties and I shall discuss their work further throughout this chapter.

*Ignoramus Anonymous* tackles the anxiety and antagonism of ignorance through the creation of a play space, and I will give further consideration to the way in which *Ignoramus Anonymous* participants are tasked with the play of the project throughout this chapter. I will also consider the similarities between the play of *Ignoramus Anonymous* and the Eastern philosophy of *maya lila*, as well as Derrida’s idea of supplementarity. These considerations involve coming to terms with a series of paradoxes, such as how the play of *Ignoramus Anonymous* can be maintained for the participants and myself despite the level of professionalism with which I treat the project, and the level of seriousness with which the project tends to be treated by most people who participate. This will contest Huizinga’s assertion that the “spirit of the professional is no longer the true play-spirit” because “it is lacking in spontaneity and carelessness” (Huizinga 1949, p. 197). *Ignoramus Anonymous* is a work of art, and this work is conducted through the establishment of a play-world and a play-spirit. Consequently, this thesis argues that the project possesses the intrinsic value of play and the instrumental value of work.

**I Don’t Know**

When debriefing after an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting with artist friend Clare Britton, the conversation turned to the role the support group meetings played in my research. I mentioned that the process had started with an interest in the concept and activity of play, and that I had begun by wanting to get to the bottom
of my process of playing with social forms and playing with the public as an artist. I noted that I had since shifted to a focus on the idea of ignorance and the activity of these support group meetings for ignorance in particular. I made a confession of ignorance: I was not entirely sure what my research had to do with play anymore. Without much of a pause, the immediate response from Britton was that it felt to her still very much to do with play. “To say “I don’t know” is to be at play”, she said, “and the meeting is spent saying the phrase I don’t know”. With this response from Britton, I returned with new curiosity to the idea of play and how it might be enacted in the support groups. What might be revealed in thinking of the support groups as activities of play and as play spaces? How might ‘not-knowing’ equate to being ‘at play’?

Like the characters in Plato’s dialogues, we spend a great deal of time at Ignoramus Anonymous meetings saying “I don’t know”. To utter this phrase is to bring uncertainty to the surface. It has an unknown outcome. What might happen next? It certainly makes the speaker of the phrase vulnerable, and might even result in their embarrassment. Uncertainty and unknown outcomes are at the heart of play. Think of playing sport or playing improvisational music: there is always a certain framework or set of rules or structure, even if the outcomes are unknown. The sports players and improvisers are saying “I don’t know” before they commence. For them to say this phrase allows the play to commence, and through the uncertainty of the unfolding process there is the possibility of arriving at a transformative result. To reach the transformative result of new knowledge and understanding, it is also important to start by saying “I don’t know”. This sets off the play and the uncertain path towards discovery. If you only say “I know”, then

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100 At one meeting in particular the group discussed the feelings we each had when saying, “I don’t know”. One participant made the observation that there is an Australian colloquialism that perhaps emerged to counter the vulnerability of expressing the phrase, and even find empowerment in it: “Buggered if I know”. With such an expression, there is pride to be found in ignorance.

101 After the meetings that she convened in my absence, Woodhouse contended that the project is actually about the phrase “I wonder...” rather than “I don’t know”. Her feeling was that “I wonder” opens up space, whereas “I don’t know” shuts space down. Consequently, she thinks that the former imbues a sense of curiosity in what you don’t know when you say the phrase (Woodhouse 2017).
how can you play? Another participant asserted at an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting that the phrase “I know” should be removed from our vocabulary. He said this because he believed no one could truly know anything with absolute certainty. Nothing is guaranteed. The second reason, he asserted, was because to say “I know” halts progress. Saying “I know” prevents the commencement of play. Drawing on Huizinga, whose thesis is that play produces culture, it could be said that in saying “I don’t know” culture is produced.

When Huizinga asserts that play produces culture he does not mean that civilisation has arisen out of play by some evolutionary process, in the sense that something which was originally play passed into something that was no longer play and could henceforth be called culture. His view is that in play society expresses its interpretation of life and the world. Play did not turn into culture, but in its earliest phases culture has the character of play and proceeds in the shape and mood of play (Huizinga 1949, p. 46). As culture then proceeds, either progressing or repressing, this original relationship between play and non-play does not remain static. The play element gradually recedes into the background and the remainder crystallises as knowledge, in the arts and various forms of judicial and social life. The original play element becomes almost completely hidden behind the culture it manifests. However, at any moment, an instinct to play may reassert itself in full force, drowning the individual and the mass in the intoxication of an immense game (Huizinga 1949, pp. 46-47).

To sit with strangers in the support group circle of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting and freely say “I don’t know” is to reintroduce the intoxicating game that Huizinga talks about. A temporary micro-community forms in which we express together our interpretation and understanding of life and the world. The phrase “I don’t know” produces an interplay with what is beyond our spheres of knowledge and understanding. The phrase expands those spheres and produces new

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102 This position is somewhat contrary to the pragmatism I have discussed in my research, wherein knowing something simply needs to be good enough to get something done.
knowledge and understandings. It produces culture, in the sense of new ways of life and ‘doing things’, through a critical engagement with what is unknown. For Huizinga, play becomes possible “when an influx of mind breaks down the absolute determinism of the cosmos” (Huizinga 1949, p. 3), meaning that play is the creative incursion of a new logic to govern life. To know is determinate. To not-know is indeterminate. It is play. In this way, play confirms what Huizinga refers to as the “supra-logical nature of the human situation”, in that play makes living beings more than mechanical and rational (Huizinga 1949, p. 4). To say “I don’t know” is to express the more than merely rational beings that we truly are. It is the expression of freedom, and for Huizinga a central characteristic of play is that it is free, and in fact: freedom itself (Huizinga 1949, p. 8).

**Antagonism of Ignorance**

Play can still be far from a complete joy. Despite Huizinga suggesting that play is our true nature; the play of not-knowing and expressing this not-knowing can always retain a sense of social discomfort. Darren O’Donnell, a Canadian artist, writer and director of performance company Mammalian Diving Reflex, suggests that social discomfort is necessary if we have any interest in increasing our social intelligence. He likens it to mental confusion, saying that “any learning process must encounter a period of confusion – without it there is no learning” (O’Donnell 2006, p. 31). For O’Donnell, discomfort and antagonism are necessary to foster social intelligence, and are the hallmarks of a successful encounter that may foster...
such intelligence. His projects with Mammalian Diving Reflex are noteworthy and playful examples of such encounters. They bear a similarity to my practice, in which social forms are played-with in order to create the play-space of a performance. The company’s project, *Haircuts by Children* (2006-ongoing), for example, involves children aged eight to twelve being trained by professional hairstylists. They are then paid to run a real hair salon, offering members of the public free haircuts. Acting as-if they are hairstylists transcends into actually running a hair salon. In the Mammalian Diving Reflex project *Home Tours* (2005) an audience walks the neighbourhood, knocking on doors to ask for a glimpse inside homes in the local area. What I call a “playing-with”, O’Donnell thinks of as inducing encounters between individuals where the aegis of art is brought out into the world and used to blanket traditionally non-artistic activity. Consequently, the projects become activities in which power differentials are at least tacitly acknowledged and the artistic manoeuvre is to either reverse or erase these differentials in a gesture of antagonism that contributes to rising social intelligence (O’Donnell 2006, p. 33). In the way that the projects become ‘activities’, it can be observed that the playing-with of social forms produces an art/not-art duality. *Haircuts by Children* is both an art project and a hair salon. *Home Tours* is both an art project and a neighbourhood tour. A similar sense of playful artistic manoeuvring can be observed in the aforementioned projects of Ringholt, which are both art projects and gallery tours and workshops. Further local examples include Melbourne-based artist Amy Spiers’ *Miranda Must Go* (2017), a campaign to direct attention away from the fictional vanishing of white women in *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and towards the real loss and trauma of Indigenous life at the actual site of Hanging Rock in Victoria; and in *Artefact* (2016), a memorial for obsolete technology staged by Melbourne-based collective Aphids.105

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105 For more information on the pragmatic goals achieved in the art/not-art duality of these projects, see Spiers’ thesis *Miranda Must Go: Rethinking the generative capacities of critique, discomfort and disensus in socially engaged and site responsive art* (Spiers 2018) and Aphids’ *Artefact: grieving dead tech* (Whittaker 2017).
I received first-hand experience of the reversal of power differentials in the work of Mammalian Diving Reflex when I participated in *Haircuts by Children* at the 2008 Sydney Festival. The power difference between the children running the salon and myself as an adult became palpable when I arrived, and then inverted when I sat down to subject myself to the authority of a child named Michaela as my personal hairdresser.\footnote{Michaela tried to insist on giving me a Mohawk, but I managed to talk her into the ‘style’ depicted in the picture of her and I below, which was taken after the appointment.} The discomfort I felt in this inversion was the gesture of antagonism in the work. When he writes of the artistic manoeuvring of power differentials in such gestures of antagonism, O’Donnell could just as easily be discussing *Ignoramus Anonymous*. The power differentials between knowledge and ignorance are erased through the antagonism of the support group. O’Donnell notes Bishop’s call for antagonism, which for Bishop runs counter to what she characterises as the utopic romanticism of Kester. Bishop thinks that utopias are a fanciful delusion, and unproductive in the first place.\footnote{O’Donnell draws on Canadian First Nations activist Ward Churchill’s explanation as to why such utopic aspirations are unproductive, because “there will be no significant change in current economic arrangements without enduring personal discomfort” (O’Donnell 2006, p. 33). Likewise science-fiction writer Kim Stanley Robinson feels that utopia needs redefining as an eternally ongoing process of struggle, “the process of making a better world, the name for one path history can take, a dynamic, tumultuous, agonising process, with no end” (Stanley Robinson 1988, p. 95). Indeed, as I have previously discussed, it has been my experience in teaching at university that learning does not happen without enduring personal discomfort either, but that students also mostly shy away from such a feeling.} Having said this, O’Donnell feels that there might still be a way to reconcile the positions of Bishop and Kester.
For O’Donnell, the way to address the Bishop versus Kester problem is through work in which relational situations employ moments of antagonism toward a unification of oppositions and binaries in the civic sphere. He wonders whether civic institutions could be used as material to create the basis of an art practice (O’Donnell 2006, p. 33). *Ignoramus Anonymous* is an example of such a use of civic institutions as material within an art practice, in the sense that the institutional context of the library and community centre have been engaged with, and the social form of the support group has been adopted for the project. Consequently, where *Haircuts by Children*, for example, employs a sense of antagonistic play towards a unification of children and adults in the civic sphere, *Ignoramus Anonymous* employs a similar sense of antagonism towards the unification of the ‘knowledgeable’ and the ‘ignorant’. The project does so by calling you ignorant, but it simultaneously calls everyone else ignorant as well. This is an example of how the positions of Bishop and Kester might be reconciled through play, particularly by playing with social forms in a process of civic engagement.


Playing with Social Form

The social form of the support group in *Ignoramus Anonymous* creates a familiarity in terms of function and machination of the event, and the *playing-with* of the support group turns it into what has been described by serial attendee of the project in Thirroul, Simon Leary, as a space of “joyous free-play”. Leary describes the meetings as free-play because of their “openness”. He feels that they can “scoot off” in any direction the group imagines, and that there is a cathartic joy both in being so open with one another and in the way that both creative and critical faculties are stimulated in the process (Leary 2019).

Similarly, Huizinga suggests “it is precisely this fun-element that characterises the essence of play” (Huizinga 1949, p. 3). That *Ignoramus Anonymous* is fun is important to both the example it demonstrates of playing with social form and to the achievements of the project, but such fun does not have to be at the expense of the antagonism and social discomfort that might be inherent in the process. If forms of antagonism are felt, as I have heard they were in the mild shame, embarrassment and social discomfort that resulted from attending meetings, then this is an antagonism directed towards unification through conversations about ignorance, conversations that bear social discomfort in that they involve talking with a group about your ignorance.

At an early trial run of *Ignoramus Anonymous* in 2012, at The State Library of Western Australia, artist Renae Coles shared her ignorance regarding the geography and significance of the Torres Strait Islands in relation to Australia. It was precisely the sort of subject matter confessed in precisely the sort of way that I envisioned the project would provide a space to discuss. Coles had shared her lack of knowledge without any prompting, and it felt like a genuine weight off her mind. In 2017, when discussing my research, Coles mentioned the shame she felt in sharing her ignorance at the time and that it had stayed with her over the years. She noted that it had been exacerbated by another participant present, a
community arts worker, whose face Coles recalled “reflected the deep shame that I felt” (Coles 2019). Her ignorance about the Torres Strait Islands entered the feedback loop of the project and became a regular example that I use in the guided meditation that begins an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting.108

This is the sort of antagonism that O’Donnell calls for in response to Bishop. However, in order for the antagonism to commence, the seduction of play has to be utilised. Play seduces because of the element of fun that necessarily characterises the very essence of the activity. A tension between fun and antagonism are then held in a double-bind similar to that of irony and sincerity of the project. Expanding upon the double-bind of simultaneous irony and sincerity inherent in Ignoramus Anonymous, there is also a tension between these senses of fun and antagonism in the project. In this way the project embodies what philosopher Emily Ryall considers the paradox at the heart of play: “It is serious and non-serious. It is important but trivial. And it is of ultimate value and no value at all” (Ryall 2018, p. 52). For this reason, it might prove useful to consider the dualities of Ignoramus Anonymous in relation to the Eastern philosophy of play itself, known as maya lila.

**Maya Lila**

Throughout this exegesis, I have asserted that playing-with the social form of the support group brings about the possibility of a series of dualities. These dualities continually oscillate, without ever coming to rest on a singular fixed identity. Performance theorist Richard Schechner draws on the Eastern philosophy of maya lila to describe what he thinks of as the enacting of a “not” in this sort of process (Schechner 1993, p. 30). Schechner explains this presence of a “not” through Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*: Ophelia is not there. She was never there. She only exists in the playing field between rehearsal, performers, performance, dramatic text,
performance text, spectators and readers. Laurence Olivier is not Hamlet, but he is also not not Hamlet. The reverse is true too: Hamlet is not Olivier, but he is also not not Olivier. Within this field or frame of double negativity, choice and virtuality remain open (Schechner 1993, p. 30).

*Maya lila* rejects Western systems of rigid impermeable frames, unambiguous metacommunications, and rules inscribing hierarchical arrangements of reality (Schechner 1993, p. 34). Schechner describes *maya lila* as generating performances that are interpenetrating, transformable, non-exclusive and porous realities. All of these are play worlds that are the slippery ground of contingent being and experience. That is, from the Indian perspective, the universe consists of playing. To be “at play” is to recognise that all relationships are provisional. Within this school of thought, ultimate reality, if there is such a thing, is *neti*, meaning: “not that”. The only realities that can be experienced – personally, socially, scientifically, philosophically – are then the aforementioned realities of *maya lila* (Schechner 1993, p. 34). *Maya* can most effectively be translated as meaning “transformation”, and *lila* as “play”. *Maya* first means transformation in the sense that something is made present that was not previously there. Then it comes to mean the making of something that was once present into something that is no longer present. Schechner notes that according to certain Indian philosophers: everyone of us does this every minute of our lives (Schechner 1993, pp. 28-29). One such example can be found in Huizinga’s observation that behind every abstract expression is a metaphor, and every metaphor is a play upon words. Consequently, when giving expression to life, a second poetic world is created alongside the world of nature (Huizinga 1949, p. 4). In this way, the fundamentally performative creative act of *maya lila* can be observed in my doing of things with words, or ‘play

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109 It would be reductive, as Schechner notes, to think of *maya lila* as a version of “all the world is a stage and all the men and women merely players”. Rather, it is a dynamic system with no single fixed centre and no absolute referent. Schechner views it in harmony with the contemporary science of physics and astronomy that understands the universe to be forever expanding (Schechner 1993, p. 29).
of words’, wherein “ultimate positivist distinctions between true/false and real/unreal cannot be made” (Schechner 1993, p. 29).

The binary dichotomies of Western metaphysics are non-existent in maya lila. Like the continuous playing of maya lila in a performance of Hamlet, a performance of Ignoramus Anonymous is not sincere in the traditional sense of being completely free from pretence and deceit. To borrow a term from writer Craig Pollard and apply it to my own work, Ignoramus Anonymous “performs sincerity” and evokes traits of genuine sincerity and a genuinely vulnerable position in this process of performing (Pollard 2014). It is not a parody of a support group, even though I was told on a number of occasions that the connection between the titles Ignoramus Anonymous and Alcoholics Anonymous might initially suggest parody. Artist and writer Daniel Schulze believes that because audiences are aware of concepts of fakeness and simulation, even of their own performative self, they are now able to have authentic experiences in situations that might be fake or a parody of a real situation. He argues that this awareness “allows for authentic experience that is not parody...but is genuinely real while everyone knows it is fake” (Schulze 2017, p. 58).

Schulze’s focus is on theatre practice, and he gives particular consideration to the work of British company, Forced Entertainment. Company director and writer Tim Etchells describes their work as theatre that places the audience in a world or situation, rather than describing one to them, and acknowledges the audience as a

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10 Pollard is specifically referring to a performance by the band Future Islands on The Late Show with David Letterman. He considers the performance to be aware of the impossibility to be removed from established historical discourses and artistic touchstones, but to recast this ‘burden’ as a creative opportunity. He quotes art critic Jerry Saltz, after cultural theorists Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, to suggest there is an artistic attitude herein that says: “I know that the art I’m creating may seem silly, even stupid, or that it might have been done before, but that doesn’t mean this isn’t serious” (Pollard 2014).

11 When presenting a conference paper on my research at PSi 2016 in Melbourne, a respondent felt that a parodic tone was set in the title of the project from the outset. I did not believe it to be parody, but it was partly in response to this feedback that I sought to reconcile the irony and sincerity of Ignoramus Anonymous. That conference paper can be viewed on page 67 of the appendix to this exegesis.
known part of the performance from the outset. For Etchells, this serves to create theatre that feels “more like an event” (Etchells 2004, p. 287). He likens each theatre performance that the company makes to “an event divided from daily life – an event that constantly has to deal with, account for and somehow try to transcend” that distance (Cleaves 2018).

Despite generating authentic experiences in the fake situations that they place audiences in, the performances of Forced Entertainment do not actually transcend this division between theatre event and daily life. For this reason, they do not take on the sort of art/not-art duality that an Ignoramus Anonymous event does. Consequently, I want to argue that Ignoramus Anonymous is not a “fake situation” in the first place, or indeed: a “fake support group”. Rather, I wish to assert that it is perhaps a constructed situation that takes the form of a support group for ignorance. The term ‘constructed situation’ was defined by the Situationist International, in their journal Internationale Situationniste, as “a moment of life, concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organisation of a unitary ambiance and a game of events” (Bishop, 2012, p. 85). Through their constructed situations, the Situationist International ascribed importance to finding places of play in the urban environment and an understanding of play as a non-alienating activity available to all (Bishop, 2012, p. 86). Using the constructed situation of Ignoramus Anonymous, I want to play between theatre and performance-based visual art practices, as play is wont to do in its continual movement and oscillation. This instinct perhaps stems from a defensiveness that is tied to an unconscious desire to go beyond the representation that the word “fake” implies. There is an extensive history of such desires in art practice.112 Artist and academic Katarzyna Zimna touches on this history in her book Time to Play: Action and Interaction in Contemporary Art (2014). She argues that “it is not possible or necessary to go

112 A more local and contemporary touchstone can be observed in the recent PhD thesis of artist Amy Spiers. Spiers explores the idea of ‘going too far’, and what I call an art/not-art duality in terms of a practice of ‘overidentification’, used to “to reconfigure, confuse and put into generative tension the boundaries between the real and the imaginary, in order to animate new political subjectivities and altered perceptions” (Spiers 2018, p. 52).
beyond representation in artistic practice, although this desire has always been one of the engines of change within culture and art” (Zimna 2014, p. 126). She focuses specifically on how play has often been used as fuel for that engine. I too once considered play as a similar fuel in my practice and in this research. However, I have now re-thought the idea of representation as no longer something to be overcome, as I previously did. Rather, representation and reality are further oscillations that Ignoramus Anonymous makes, and they bear a considerable likeness to Derrida’s idea of supplementarity, which I want to consider before concluding this chapter.

**Supplementarity**

Derrida observes that Western metaphysics is based on binary dichotomies, for example: reality/representation, day/night, speech/writing, life/death, true/false, work/play. He employs the term ‘supplement’ to these hierarchical dichotomies in order to deconstruct these relationships, wherein valuations structure our metaphors, outlooks, attitudes and actions. Rather than the supplement being seen as only existing in relation to the primary and being incomplete as a separate entity, for Derrida both the primary and the supplementary are incomplete without one another (Zimna 2014, p. 60). A supplement such as ‘play’ is more than secondary to the primary ‘work’. Play serves as an aid to constitute the very idea of work.

I previously mentioned Derrida’s idea of the parergon in relation to the paratextual material of art practices and projects. The *parergon* refers to the subordinate supplement to a primary *ergon* (Zimna 2014, p. 60). As I demonstrated, the Ignoramus Anonymous paratexts are far from ornamental and external complements to the project, but actively play a part in the work the project does as an initial framing device. As Zimna notes, with the ergon being the purpose and function that is possessed and performed by every object and living being (Zimna 2014, p. 56), the parergon is then integral to such utility because it constitutes the
very identity of the work (Zimna 2014, p. 61). The supplement usurps the identity of what might initially be thought to be primary by exposing the primary identity as incomplete and non-existent without the supplement (Zimna 2014, p. 61). The logic of supplementarity means that a simple frame cannot hermetically separate seriousness and work from play. They constitute and define one another (Zimna 2014, p. 62). As I suggested of the Ignoramus Anonymous paratexts, this then raises the question as to whether there can ever be an outside of the frame of play for the project?

To encounter Ignoramus Anonymous is to be engaged in the play it proposes. The play frame of the project is not an ornamental limit that somehow separates an inside of the project from an outside. This is in line with what Zimna argues through analysis of Derrida’s logic of supplementarity. As Zimna notes, if a work of art was really complete then it would not need something extra, like a frame. The work, or ergon, of representation does not end at the frame, where the parergon then begins. They are not separate (Zimna 2014, p. 61). For this reason, I propose that maya lila is a useful way to understand the play frame of projects like Ignoramus Anonymous, but at the same time the idea of the frame is also somehow ineffective as well.

**From a Frame to a Net**

Assuming that the play spirit is carried back into the everyday after an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, Schechner may be right when he suggests that Bateson’s frame of play, while a rational attempt to contain play within definable borders, is actually a little off the mark. Bateson’s frame of play, which I touched on in the

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113 The terms ergon and parergon descend from Ancient Greek philosophy. Plato notes that performing ergon is a means to contribute to the well being of the state, and consequently – the individual” (Zimna 2014, p. 57). Aristotle considers the ethical implications of ergon to be structured around purpose, pre-supposing that all that exists has an inherent outcome and goal to meet. For Aristotle, the ultimate goal is to live well through attaining the fulfillment of rationality and proper function, which is logos, the state of happiness (Zimna 2014, p. 57).
Prologue of this exegesis, is a metacommunicative message that separates what is play from what is not play. It is a tool to open up dialogues and understandings between living beings (Bateson 1972). However, Schechner thinks the idea of a frame of play might be too impermeable, too “on/off” and “inside/outside”. It is for this reason that Schechner feels the idea of a “net” may be a better metaphor, because a net is a porous flexible gatherer and a three-dimensional, dynamic, flow-through container (Schechner 1993, p. 41). With the blurred beginning and ending of Ignoramus Anonymous, and the integration of the project with everyday life, at first I thought of the frame of the project as one of “dark play”. Schechner uses the term “dark play” to describe situations in which the frame of play might be concealed. In “dark play” the frame remains hidden and the play activity is undertaken unconsciously by the players (Schechner 1993, pp. 36-39). Bateson’s communicative frame that announces “this is play” is not evident in Schechner’s dark play. In dark play the players might not know that they are playing, but they are playing nonetheless. However, perhaps the very idea of a frame of play is a misplaced metaphor to understand Ignoramus Anonymous in the first instance. Perhaps Ignoramus Anonymous is better thought of as flowing through a “net of play”. At each of the twists and turns and stages in the flow of the project is a spark that oscillates between joy and discomfort, irony and sincerity, art and not-art, the known and the unknown. This flow of the project is a continual process of play. Consequently, Ignoramus Anonymous does not so much imitate play as epitomise it, as Schechner believes all performance-making does (Schechner 1993, p. 41).

**Conclusion: The Parergon of Play**

Aristotle believed that ergon should not be derailed by play. For Aristotle, play is a trivial pursuit. To exert oneself towards play is a frivolous waste of time and the opposite of seriousness (Zimna 2014, p. 58). The structured purpose and proper function of ergon should remain the goal. Through the serious play of my research, however, I have explored the latent function of a playgroup for adults in which participants are required to sit with their ignorance.
Instinctively, it might be a silly waste to ‘Google’ a question that is on your mind at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, rather than through the Google search engine that might provide you with an actual answer. Doing so, however, is an example of the parergon of play that this research explores, in the sense that proper functions and the limits and uses of established ergons have been played with and repurposed towards a new ergon through *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This is what Zimna means by the play of the parergon frame working against the self-sufficiency of the ergon, opening it up for intervention and making it fluid (Zimna 2014, p. 62). Doing so through *Ignoramus Anonymous* reveals how the proper function of an ergon is linked with identification and self-identity, labelling what we do and who we are (Zimna 2014, p. 58). This is true on two levels. Firstly, in the sense of the knowledge and understandings through which we construct our identities, which the maya lila and parergon activities of *Ignoramus Anonymous* antagonises and makes fluid. Secondly, in the sense of where my work is at as an artist now that I have completed this *Ignoramus Anonymous* research. I will turn now to consider how my research has fed back into my practice as an artist, and summarise the understandings I have reached.
Conclusion: Goodbye Ignorance?

An Expert in Ignorance

It is my understanding that at the conclusion of a PhD, the candidate should have reached a significant level of expertise in the particular area of their research. As the conclusion of this PhD came closer and closer, I wondered what exactly I might be an expert in when I finished. In amusing myself with the somewhat paradoxical thought that I might be ‘An Expert in Ignorance’, I returned to consider the initial questions that drove my research: What is going on in Ignoramus Anonymous? What new knowledge and understandings can be produced through the project?

Addressing these questions might reveal what I might really now be an expert in. From the starting point they provided, my process has been one of continually wondering what can be understood through the positioning of the multifaceted Ignoramus Anonymous project within different terrains of discourse. The philosophy of Rancière and Dewey have been but two examples of the terrain I have placed the project in, with a new line of enquiry arising for me to attend to at each such point. Each of these points has then produced a new line of wondering and investigation.

These moments of wondering in my research, like the moments of wondering at an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, are very much like a moment of play. Victor Turner, who specialised in symbolic and interpretive anthropology, wrote of play being transient and recalcitrant to localisation, to placement, to fixation. For Turner, play is a joker in the neuro-anthropological act (Turner 1986, p. 30). Turner suggests that play involves a constant process of movement, and also of reinvention and redirection. This is captured in a passing reference that he makes to a “wheel of play”. The wheel of play, he says, “reveals to us the possibility of changing our goals and, therefore, the restructuring of what our culture states to
be reality” (Turner 1986, p. 31). This changing of goals and restructuring of what our culture states to be reality can be observed in the play of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting, in the way that the goal shifts from acquiring knowledge and understanding to the creation of a reality in which a group of people can comfortably sit with their ignorance in a temporary micro-community. It can also be observed in the research I have conducted through *Ignoramus Anonymous*. Turner’s wheel of play is representative of the process through which my research has been undertaken and this exegesis written. In diagrammatic fashion, the wheel of play of my research process might look like this:

![Diagram representing 'The Wheel of Play'. Image: Laura Caesar and Malcolm Whittaker.](image)

The wheel of play suggests the on-going live nature of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, as support group, art project and research project. Because it is a circular wheel that turns in either direction, there is the suggestion that each component of the wheel is of equal importance to the research. Turning the wheel of play was my practice-based research process with *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This wheel of play and
research is yet another recurrence of the idea of turning in my intellectual adventure of ignorance. It feels like a useful metaphor to use to begin to bring my exegesis to a conclusion. I say bring my *exegesis* to a conclusion rather than my *research* to a conclusion because I do not feel this is the end of my research. I may no longer run *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings after this research, given the exhaustive nature of a PhD, but I will continue playing with social forms and playing as research. My wheel of play, which is simultaneously a wheel of research, will continue to turn. It will continue inputting social forms, experiences and literature, and outputting new projects and new understandings. Before concluding, I will turn to consider a problem I found with the free-wheeling nature of my research methodology.

**Free-wheeling**

Schechner challenges what he believes to be some internal problems in Turner’s notion of a wheel of play. Schechner’s problem directly relates to Turner’s assertion of play as “free-wheeling” (Turner 1986, p. 31). Schechner’s issue is that if an activity is truly “free-wheeling” then it is without purposeful instrumentality (Schechner 1993, p. 25). Also, anything free-wheeling must still always obey certain laws. Gravity is an example of such a binding law. Schechner makes his point by contending that play is not always as free-wheeling as Turner suggests. He doesn’t argue his case using the example of gravity, but rather through noting the pedagogical capacities of play, as well as the role of foreplay in procreation, and the carefully orchestrated nature of play in the American Super Bowl (Schechner 1993, p. 25). The issue raised by Schechner is also a problem for *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

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114 This wheel of play and research will also continue to turn over some thinking generated through *Ignoramus Anonymous* that became jettisoned from this exegesis, including the previously mentioned applications of the *Ignoramus Anonymous* methodology in the university classroom, as well as the Zen-like ‘Beginner’s Mind’ that results from an ignorant turn, and the idea of the “conversational serif”, which I coined to describe the particular method that artists use when engaging in dialogue with the public as part of their practice.
Anonymous as a research project. For how can Ignoramus Anonymous be in equal measure “free-wheeling”, and have possessed a deliberate research strategy?

Perhaps this wheel of play is the purposeful instrumentality. The play of Ignoramus Anonymous serves as a means towards realising the unknown end of the original idea of running a support group for ignorance. This exegesis articulates what happened as that idea took shape and was executed. Through a practice of “free-wheeling” play and research I have produced a responsive narrative that is captured within this exegesis. This exegesis is a space of testing and exploration, not just a summative account. Like my research, the exegesis is also a space of play. My research methodology possesses the characteristics of play in the way it has been responsive to support group meeting participants (players) and the sites, contexts and literature encountered and engaged with throughout my process. I have stuck with the format of Ignoramus Anonymous as a performance project for a long time. That the play frame of the project and the format of how meetings have been conducted has remained fixed during this time might also appear far from free-wheeling. However, it is within this frame that the free-wheeling happens. Somewhere that was unpredictable from the outset of my research has been arrived at through a slow evolution of thinking that required a commitment to this frame of the support group meetings, and an openness as to where and how it might unfold. However, with the presence of play in my exploration I felt as if my research could continue ad infinitum. There would always be more to play with.

This notion that there would always be more to play with came up as a topic of conversation at an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting at Thirroul in 2017. Based on what he believed was an anecdote from American writer and mythologist Joseph Campbell (but which I could not confirm), Simon Leary raised the idea of “different psyches” in learning: “The American attitude is to “get it” and move on. The European attitude is to “play with it” and explore” (Leary 2019). The group agreed that it is probably reductive to think of these dispositions as being inherent
in an ‘American versus European’ dichotomy, but that instinctively there is definitely something to be said for considering these opposing attitudes to learning. This sense of “playing with it” in the attitude of the latter once again suggests that ignorance always abounds, and that more research can always be undertaken. More information can always be wrung from an experience. The wheel of play can continue to turn. This raises the question: Where does it end?

As I continued to run Ignoramus Anonymous support groups as part of my research, the meetings were becoming increasingly self-reflexive. This was observed by Jaspers, who attended a meeting at Frontyard Projects in 2017 for the first time since 2014. We wondered whether such self-reflexivity was in some way led by me and where I was at in thinking through the project as research. By this point, Jaspers had begun her own PhD research into curatorial practices and performativity. We compared the instrumental approach of her research, for which there were purposeful questions driving an argument from the outset, with that of my exploratory practice-based approach to research. It seemed that my research was mirroring the Ignoramus Anonymous support groups, in the sense that there was no final end goal or denouement. Both could continue in an infinite process of free-wheeling in their co-emergent processes, throwing up new curiosities and questions, new lines of enquiry, and new anecdotes and data for reflection and analysis.

Whilst there may be no denouement at Ignoramus Anonymous, there are certainly outcomes, as I have articulated in this exegesis. Those outcomes, of both the meetings and my research, have come about through the focused process of reflection and analysis that the meetings commence, which have then been articulated in this exegesis. In this exegesis, I have articulated a series of contributions of new knowledge to the field of socially engaged live art, opening up this field to new methods and understandings for my peers, future practitioners and scholars. These contributions include:
• An understanding of the pedagogy involved in the support that *Ignoramus Anonymous* provides, in the way a temporary micro-community turns towards their ignorance together.

• The possibility of intellectual emancipation in this pedagogical process, as the temporary micro-community comes together to sit with their ignorance and reflect.

• The ways in which this pedagogy and emancipation might be achieved via my practice as an artist, specifically through *playing-with* the context of a support group, in which ‘things are done with words’ to provide a *play-space* that has both an everyday and an aesthetic experience.

• The way in which the everyday and aesthetic experience of *Ignoramus Anonymous* has an art/not-art duality and pragmatism in which participants interact with both each other and the physical and socio-cultural environments in which the meetings take place.

• These interactions have further suggested that *Ignoramus Anonymous* presents a fruitful study of ideas in the fields of agnotology and psychology.

**Playing with Ideas**

Like Bateson, I know that these ideas of my research have been *played with* in order to understand them and fit them together, just as I *played with* the social form of a support group to produce *Ignoramus Anonymous*. In this context, this is ‘play’ in the sense that a small child ‘plays’ with blocks, in order to understand how they fit together. Bateson notes that the central purpose of much play is to discover the rules. He argues that play is like life, “a game whose purpose is to discover the rules, which rules are always changing and always undiscoverable”
(Bateson 1972, pp. 31-33). Like the child with their building blocks observed by Bateson, we are always rather serious about our play at *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This degree of seriousness demonstrates Derrida’s logic of supplementarity within the project, and enables an analysis of the work (as *ergon*) and play (as *parergon*) within my processes. The work and play, of my art practice and research, are interconnected and mutually dependent. Because of this, perhaps my practice as an artist and researcher constitutes neither work nor play but exceeds the restricted meanings of such futile terminology.

What the work and play of my research have revealed is this: *Ignoramus Anonymous* is not about something, it *is something*. It *does something*. Looking for its meaning is not as important as looking for its use, for it is in this use where the meaning can be found. In doing so, the processes of play and work can be observed to be brought together. The work of art is a verb rather than a noun, and the work it does is to introduce the experience of play into everyday life, making the everyday strange, and confounding the closure, stasis and fixity of knowledge and understanding therein. Intellectual emancipation then becomes possible, as *Ignoramus Anonymous* participants collectively say ‘Hello’ to their ignorance together.

**Goodbye Ignorance**

We might proverbially say ‘Hello’ to our ignorance at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, but I have also proverbially said ‘Goodbye’ to a sense of ignorance through the understandings I have reached in my intellectual adventure with the project. In the course of this adventure, I began to make connections between all manner of my own everyday experiences and my research. Two such experiences came about through movies I enjoyed when wrestling with the play of my research.

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115 I would add that in my research the purpose of play has been to discover rules in order to implement them as a structure that orchestrates the play space of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, for myself and for others.
I have always been fond of A.A. Milne’s *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories, and in a nine-month period between December 2017 and September 2018 I was spoilt with two films based on Milne and his writing. The first, *Goodbye Christopher Robin* (2017), is a biopic centered on the strained relationship between Milne and his son Christopher Robin after the global success of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* stories, which were inspired by Milne’s observations of Christopher Robin at play. In the second, *Christopher Robin* (2018), the fictional Christopher Robin has grown into a man like his father, a man who is ‘all work and no play’. Indeed, he seems to have grown up and forgotten how to play. That is until Winnie-the-Pooh and his friends re-enter his life to remind him that “doing nothing often leads to the very best kind of something” (*Christopher Robin* 2018).\(^{116}\) Christopher Robin consequently realises the necessity of play for a meaningful and productive life. *Goodbye Christopher Robin* portrays Milne writing the stories based on the play of Christopher Robin, which consequently taint the innocence of his son’s play as he becomes a character and celebrity through the stories. At one point Christopher Robin says to his father: “Are you writing a book? I thought we were having fun?” To which Milne replies: “We’re writing a book and having fun” (*Goodbye Christopher Robin* 2017). Milne had used the play of his son as his research, leading Christopher Robin to feel that the play became disingenuous. The same thought occurred to me regarding the play of *Ignoramus Anonymous* being affected by the process of my research and writing this exegesis. I have already noted the observation of an emergent change in the meetings becoming increasingly self-aware throughout my research. *Ignoramus Anonymous* has been a play space for my observations, like Christopher Robin was with his toys for Milne. Both Milne and I were taken by something that emerged from the play. We were both taken by a ‘spark’, of sorts. In the 2018 film, the character of Christopher Robin is lacking such playful sparks, opting instead for the maxim: “Nothing comes from nothing”. Enter Winnie-the-Pooh, fittingly a bear of “very little brain”, to re-spark Christopher Robin’s sense of play with a maxim of his own: “People say nothing is impossible, but I do nothing

\(^{116}\) This quote features in both the film and the original Milne stories.
every day” (Christopher Robin 2018). Indeed, in the original Milne stories Pooh seemingly acknowledges his own emancipatory ignorance when he recognises that his friend Rabbit is rather clever, but that is also “why he never understands anything” (Hoff 1994, p. 27).

When Christopher Robin and Pooh reunite in Christopher Robin (2018), they immediately get lost in the fictional play-space of the Hundred Acre Woods, whereupon Christopher Robin wonders which direction they should head. Winnie-the-Pooh replies: “I always get to where I’m going by walking away from where I’ve been. That’s the way I do it” (Christopher Robin 2018). When Winnie-the-Pooh fears running into their old nemeses, the honey-stealing Woozles, Christopher Robin tries to assure him that they are not real. However, Pooh-Bear points out a sign warning of them, concluding that they must be real. The sign, like an Ignoramus Anonymous paratext, represents a building block of a world where make-believe transcends into make-belief. These sparks of play take us off course from the ergon of something to the parergon of nothing. Doing nothing, however, like asking questions without looking for answers and sitting instead with a curiosity regarding your ignorance, is actually far from nothing, and leads to a rather fruitful something. It leads to a space wherein we all become the bears of little brain that we truly are, sparked into wonder through the implementation of the serious play of the Ignoramus Anonymous context. As Pooh-Bear says, “there is always time for a smackeral of wonder” (Christopher Robin 2018).

What remains for me to wonder is what exactly I may now be an expert in, and there is plenty of time for this now that I have reached the conclusion of this intellectual adventure in ignorance.
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A BIGGER BOOK OF IGNORANCE
This appendix is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy from The University of Wollongong by Malcolm Whittaker.

School of the Arts, English and Media
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March, 2019

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*Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance*

This appendix contains a selection of the ephemera, collateral and paratexts that have been produced over the course of the intellectual adventure of running *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings.

When *Ignoramus Anonymous* commenced in 2013, I produced a *Little Book of Ignorance* to complement the project. Six years later, this *Bigger Book of Ignorance* is a document that now complements the research I have conducted through the project and acts as a coda for the project itself. It is intended to support the PhD exegesis by charting the history of the project, as well as existing in its own right as part of the world of *Ignoramus Anonymous*. 
Ignoramus Anonymous, Curriculum Vitae

2012  Waverley Council Library, Sydney 2012
      Two trial meetings held as part of Waverley Council artist residency

      State Library of Western Australia, Perth 2012
      Two trial meetings held as part of artist residency at CIA Studios, Perth
      Supported by the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund

2013  State Library of New South Wales, Sydney 2013-2014
      Eleven meetings held on a monthly basis in The Shakespeare Room
      Supported by the Australia Council for the Arts.

      Waverley Council, Sydney 2013-2014
      Ten meetings held on a monthly basis in the Waverley Library Theatrette

      Junction Arts Festival, Launceston 2013
      Two meetings held, one at Launceston Library and one at Sawtooth ARI

2014  Museum of Contemporary Art, curated by Performance Space, Sydney 2014
      Six meetings held in The Resource Room

      Festival of Live Art, Arts House, Melbourne 2014
      Five meetings held in a meeting room at the North Melbourne Town Hall

      The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne 2014
      Six meetings held at The Wheeler Centre, Melbourne

2015  Bondi Feast Festival, Sydney 2015
      Four meetings held at the Bondi Pavilion Gallery

      STILL NOTHING NEW, group exhibition curated by Sophie Kitson, Sydney 2015
      Two meetings held at King Street Gallery

2017  The Big Anxiety Festival, Sydney 2017
      One regular meeting held, along with many shorter ‘one-on-one’ meetings,
      at Customs House, Sydney

      Thirroul Community Centre, Wollongong 2017
      Six meetings held in The Cabbage Palm Room of Thirroul Community Centre

      Frontyard Projects, Sydney 2017
      Six meetings held in the library at Frontyard Projects
Home of Emma Saunders, Wollongong 2017
One meeting held in the form of a party at the home of dance artist and
teacher Emma Saunders in Austinmer, NSW.

FBI Radio / Artspace, Sydney 2017
A short meeting held for broadcast on live radio from Artspace, Sydney

2018 Frontyard Projects, Sydney 2018
One meeting held in the library at Frontyard Projects as part of the
Frontyard Summer School

Rex Cramphorn Studio, Sydney 2018
One meeting held at the Rex Cramphorn Studio at The University of
Sydney for documentation purposes.

2019 Thirroul Community Centre, Wollongong 2019
Four meetings held in The Cabbage Palm Room of Thirroul Community
Centre
PUBLICITY MATERIALS
Do you control your thinking, or does it control you?

IGNORAMUS ANONYMOUS
A performed support group for anyone and everyone towards intellectual emancipation

28th & 29th November, 6:30pm - 7:30pm, State Library of Western Australia, ‘Gascoyne Room’ (Ground Floor)

Figure 2
Flyer inviting participants to a work-in-progress trial of Ignoramus Anonymous at State Library of Western Australia (2012). Image: Malcolm Whittaker.
Ignoramus Anonymous takes the form of a small tongue-in-cheek support group for the ignorant (yes, the ignorant!) over a glass of wine. Participants will receive a free copy of the Little Book of Ignorance – a playful workbook to explore one’s ignorance in more depth after the meeting.

Language warning: May contain some instances of offensive language. Suitable only for 18+ years.

Figure 3
Ignoramus Anonymous
Malcolm Whittaker (Sydney)

In playful reaction to a society intent on making and being experts, Ignoramus Anonymous was devised as the supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be safely confessed.

Without getting too serious, join artist Malcolm Whittaker to revel in what we do not know and that which we do not know that we do not know. Sit in the traditional support group circle where all those who are willing to share their limitations are welcome.

Ignoramus Anonymous is the space to ask questions and receive support for all that we do not know or understand, including something from the news or current affairs, or even your recent trip to MONA.

Note: Limited spaces. First in, best seated.

Figure 4
Sonic Social

Presented by The Museum of Contemporary Art
Australia and Performance Space

Directed by Performance Space

Dates 12–29 Jun 2014

Sonic Social presents a series of six participatory performance works that explore the social relationships we create through sound and music. Featuring new works by Lauren Brincat and Brown Poppy, Michaela Daines, and Super Critical Mass as well as interactive performances by Song My Ang and Malcolm Whittaker, Sonic Social mobilizes the dynamic interplay between humans, architecture and noise.

The works of Sonic Social occur throughout the MCA, reimagining the spaces of the Museum through performance. Each work activates the architecture of the building, particularly its in-between spaces: foyers, meeting rooms and stairwells — places not usually occupied by art. By animating these spaces the artists of Sonic Social open up new possibilities for what art might be in a gallery environment.

Although each work differs in intent and articulation there are shared concerns that run through the program as a whole: the power of the human voice as a vehicle for expression, and the liberation of admitting your weaknesses in public for all to hear. Sonic Social breaks the social convention of silence in an art gallery and explores the group dynamics that are brought to life in bands, choirs or support groups — and the way these collectives take on personalities of their own.

Sonic Social sits lightly in the museum space, tackling unusual locations, breaking some rules and inviting people to sing at the top of their lungs! We hope you enjoy stepping into our world.

—TP

Malcolm Whittaker

Performance Ignoramus Anonymous

Dates/Time Thurs 12, 19, 26 Jun 6pm;
Sun 14, 21, 28 Jun 3.30pm

Location MCA Level 2 Galleries

Bookings mca.com.au/events/ignoramus

Malcolm Whittaker is a Sydney-based artist whose practice encompasses writing and performance and whose works are enacted as both solo and collaborative performances. Whittaker is a member of team MESS, a Sydney-based collective and in addition to collaborating with other artists, he also incorporates the general public into his practice.

Exploring ideas of community, belonging, desire, identity, transgression, memory and endurance, his previous works have taken the form of borrowing a section of anthropology books from the library; 956.895 RUS; 956.496 RVY and displaying them, in order, on bookshelves in a gallery; listing the names of everyone he can remember meeting, counting greening dog owners, and collecting love letters exchanged between strangers.

Through Ignoramus Anonymous, Whittaker invites the public to participate in a support group for the ignorant. Taking cues from Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, these workshops provide a safe space for participants to confess their ignorance, from a lack of understanding of the minutiae of everyday life to broader questions of existence and why we are here. Encouraging ideas of intellectual assimilation, Whittaker asks participants to shed feelings of embarrassment and inadequacy and embrace what we do not know living in an age of smart phones, Google and instant access to information. It’s easy to have all our queries resolved and debates with friends won or lost instantaneously. Whittaker asks us to shed our pretensions and embrace not having all the answers.

—KM

Figure 5
There's a support group for everything these days, from fear of flying to overeating.

Do you ever feel like you don’t know anything ... that there are all kinds of important (and not so important) fragments of information you’re missing out on? Do you have a niggling feeling that you don’t even know what you don’t know?

Well, there's a support group for you, too: Ignoramus Anonymous – and we're all eligible for membership.

Join others who don't know anything, and you might solve your curly questions. Along the way, you'll probably discover you know a lot more than you thought you did – as you realise you know the answers to other people's head-scratchers.

This is a democracy of knowledge; a kind of IRL (in real life) Wikipedia, where knowledge is not top-down, but a round-circle discussion. Where everyone is invited to contribute if they have something to add, but no one need fear not having the answers.

Get off the internet, away from the keyboard, and – just for a while – abandon Google as the source of all knowledge. Turn to the person next to you for answers, and you might just be surprised.

Ignoramus Anonymous is the safe space to ask the questions that stump us – a place designed for reveling in what we don’t know (and don’t know that we don’t know). And an invitation to engage with each other, in a physical space. Just for a change.

Hosted by Malcolm Whittaker.

All sessions

There are six Ignoramus Anonymous sessions in total:

- Wednesday 17 September, 5.30pm
- Thursday 18 September, 11.30am
- Thursday 18 September, 6.30pm
- Friday 19 September, 5.30pm
- Saturday 20 September, 3.30pm
- Saturday 20 September, 5.30pm

Figure 6

Malcolm Whittaker

*Ignoramus Anonymous*

Is there something that’s caused you trouble or embarrassment; something nagging at your conscience from the news? Something seemingly nonsensical that’s always puzzled you?

*Ignoramus Anonymous* is a support group for the ignorant: for revelling in what we don’t know, and what we don’t know we don’t know.

**Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall**

Fri 21 Mar, 6.30pm & 8.30pm
Sat 22 Mar, 4.30pm & 6.30pm
Sun 23 Mar, 1pm & 3pm

1hr

FREE

*Image* Marissa Gilles

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**Figure 7**

Malcolm Whittaker

Ignoramous Anonymous

14–17 July 2015
6.30pm Daily
Bondi Pavilion Gallery

Facilitated by
Ryan McGoldrick

For more information
bondifeast.com.au

For ticket information:

Is there something that has caused you trouble or embarrassment?
Something nagging away at your conscience from the news or current affairs? Something seemingly nonsensical that’s always puzzled you?
Ignoramus Anonymous is a support group for the ignorant (ie. for anyone and everyone), for revelling in what we don’t know, and what we don’t know we don’t know.

It is a space to ask questions and receive support. A supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be safely confessed as we share our limitations of knowledge and understanding. Through a simple circle, in which our ignorance forces us to confront a democratic equality with one another, our support will propose an intellectual emancipation and an equality of intelligence in all.

Figure 8
Figure 9
AWKWARD CONVERSATIONS AT CUSTOMS HOUSE
Ends this Week!
27 SEP 2017 – 27 SEP 2017 / 11:00 AM – 7:00 PM

Embracing the awkwardness of human conversation, this program offers a unique opportunity for intimate one-on-one conversations in experimental formats, tackling anxieties, debilitating habits and hard-to-talk-about subjects like mental health.

Awkward Conversations make no demands, have no expectations, and require no social skills whatsoever.

Book a spot

Why book a spot?
Most events at The Big Anxiety are FREE or Low Cost. Venue numbers are limited, so booking your ticket helps everyone with planning and guarantees your participation in the event.

BOOK NOW

Getting There

About

Don't worry if you missed booking a spot for our Awkward Conversations Program today. You can still drop in to Customs House, to meet and talk to our conversationists between 11am – 7pm. See you there!

Dawn-Joy Leong

WHO: Dawn-joy is an autistic artist, neurodiversity advocate, musician and writer with hyper-sensory capacities. She notices things that others may not – sounds, lights, smells, textures – which are often harsh, jarring and painful to her. Join Dawn in her quest for refuge amid calm, inside a ‘clamour space’, designed for respite from an over-stimulating environment.

HOW: Dawn welcomes you into her pod to chat with her one-on-one: with words or without words, ask questions or offer ideas; make something together or just sit in silence. We can have a conversation that is comfortable for both of us.

IS IT FOR ME? Dawn relates especially well to autistic people and those with social anxiety but is happy to talk to anyone.
Malcolm Whittaker

WHO: Malcolm is interested in dispelling the anxiety of being ignorant by having open discussions that focus on what we do not know, and what we do not know that we do not know. He is an artist and an “expert in not knowing” (the subject of his PhD).

HOW: Take a leisurely walk through the library with Malcolm. Confess the limitations of your knowledge and understanding in a safe space in which you can ask each other any questions on your mind, without necessarily looking for answers to them. You’ll feel better for it!

Lois Weaver

WHO: Artist, activist, and experimental conversationalist, Lois Weaver constructs alternative models for public conversation to make space for the things we wonder about.

HOW: Drop in for a ‘Porch Sitting’, where small, informal groups sit side-by-side with Lois on the steps of Customs House to ‘wonder’, observe, dream, or reflect upon the other Awkward Conversations you have had.

James Nguyen

WHO: The anxiety of starting something new can be paralysing. Where do you begin? James is a visual and performance artist who is always confronting the first mark.

HOW: Start something new and overcome your mental block. James will take you through an exercise, making the first mark on a piece of paper.

IS IT FOR ME? Good for artists, frustrated creative people, and people who have never made art!

Bé Adam

WHO: Bé Adam (Festival Ambassador) who uses his own lived experience to inform his work in the mental health sector. He takes a strengths-based, inclusive approach to advocate for a model of care that places people at the fore of mental health programs and services. Bé has experience of protracted and persistent psychological distress since childhood and has sought many treatment methods to manage his symptoms.

HOW: Bé has lived with anxiety all his life. How does he do it? Come and hear his experience. Share yours if you want to. Or just ask questions.

Mitch Jones AKA “Captain Ruin”

WHO: Mitch Jones (Festival Ambassador) is an escapologist and circus performer, as well as festival ambassador. He has spent time in a Turkish jail, is anxious about incarceration and pursues his desire to escape the confines of conventional life.

HOW: Ask Mitch about his time in jail, practical techniques of escapism, and life in the circus.

Alessandro Donagh-De Marchi

WHO: Alessandro Donagh-De Marchi (Festival Ambassador) has been an active advocate for mental health issues and awareness for several years after his own experiences with depression and anxiety. He believes that open discussion around difficult topics is vital to start conversations that can not only improve lives but also, in some cases, to save them.

HOW: The 5-word - Alessandro offers calm, level headed conversations about suicide. Let’s just say the word and see where it goes. To make this easier; ideas can be written or drawn on a large sheet of paper at the table. Put down anything you’ve always wanted to say or ask about suicide (and read what others leave behind).

IS THIS FOR ME? Yes. It’s for anyone who has ever thought about suicide – as well as those who haven’t and feel they need to know more.

Figure 10
**Ignoramus Anonymous**

**WHAT**
A support group for the ignorant. [i.e. for anyone and everyone]. Ignoramus Anonymous is a space to discuss anything that might cause you trouble or embarrassment, nag away at your conscience or generally puzzle you. It could be an everyday quandary or something more complex. It is a space to ask questions, talk about your ignorance and receive support.

**WHEN**
First Thursday of each month, 6:30pm - 7:30pm
- Thursday 4th May
- Thursday 1st June
- Thursday 6th July
- Thursday 3rd August
- Thursday 7th September
- Thursday 5th October

**WHERE**
Cabbage Palm Room
Thirroul Community Centre
352-360 Lawrence Hargrave Dr.
Thirroul NSW 2515

Entry for Ignoramus Anonymous meetings via side door

For more information visit [www.ignoramusanonymous.com](http://www.ignoramusanonymous.com)

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**Figure 11**
What exactly is happening in the middle east? Where even is the middle east? How does an electrical switch operate? Why is February a shorter month? What is the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations? Why do we have a senate? How do you read a chicken? What is religionism? How do I become a better lover? What exactly is happening in the middle east? Where even is the middle east? How does an electrical switch operate? Why is February a shorter month? What is the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations?

**A Bigger Book of Ignorance**

**Figure 12**
A Bigger Book of Ignorance

Figure 13
Regular activities held at Thirroul Community Centre (2019). Source: Thirroul
Community Centre.

Publicity Materials

23


Figure 14

2515 Magazine is a monthly guide regarding ‘What’s On’ in the Thirroul area. The magazine heard about the support groups running at Thirroul Community Centre and suggested they run an interview.
Ignoramus Anonymous is a support group for the ignorant (i.e. for anyone and everyone). It is a space to discuss anything that might cause you trouble or embarrassment, nag away at your conscience or generally puzzle you. It could be an everyday quandary or something more complex. It is a space to ask questions, talk about your ignorance and receive support.

First Tuesday of each month, 6:30pm - 7:30pm
Tuesday 2nd May
Tuesday 6th June
Tuesday 4th July
Tuesday 1st August
Tuesday 5th September
Tuesday 3rd October

The Library
Frontyard Projects
228 Illawarra Rd.
Marrickville NSW 2204

What is neoliberalism?
How does an electrical switch operate?
What is the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations?
How do I become a better lover?

For more information visit www.ignoramusanonymous.com

Figure 15
IGNORAMUS ANONYMOUS

WHAT  Ignoramus Anonymous is a support group for the ignorant (i.e. for anyone and everyone). It is a space to discuss anything that might cause you trouble or embarrassment, nag away at your conscience or generally puzzle you. It could be an everyday quandary or something more complex. It is a space to ask questions, talk about your ignorance and receive support.

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For more information visit www.ignoramusanonymous.com

Figure 16
This meeting was inspired by host Emma Saunders’ interest in attending an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting in Thirroul, but not being able to make it at the regular meeting time because of family commitments. Consequently, Saunders invited me to facilitate a meeting at her home, for her and her friends. She invited these friends around to an “Ignorance Party” rather than a support group meeting, modeled in consultation with Saunders on the ‘Salamander Parties’ that her mother used to run as the family business when she was growing up. I began the event with the usual guided meditation, and it unfolded in a similar fashion to all the other Ignoramus Anonymous meetings.

**Figure 17**
FRONTYARD Summer School

Frontyard as a school.

What kind of school? Well, definitely not a private school, or one with any form of certification, that is for sure. More the kind of school which is asking - what is a school, what can a school be. Asking the very question of what it means to learn and teach together - from each other.

In many ways FY is already an informal school - a space for teaching, learning, thinking, making and sharing knowledge. The FYSS is simply an experiment in temporarily changing the cadence and timings of what already happens at FY. What happens when we concentrate?

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Figure 18
DOCUMENTATION
Photographic documentation

Figures 19, 20, 21

These photographs were staged immediately after the conclusion of a meeting at MCA, with the permission of the participants who were present.
A short meeting was held as part of the radio program Canvas, broadcast live from ‘Another Art Book Fair’ at Artspace, Sydney. Participants consisted of members of the public who were attending the event and other artists featuring on that particular episode of the program, which was dedicated to the launch of *un Magazine* 11.2. Despite beginning with the usual guided meditation, the meeting degenerated somewhat to the ‘Googling’ of information on smartphones, in a manner that was inconsistent with all other meetings.

A recording of the broadcast is available at https://soundcloud.com/ignoramus-anonymous
Video documentation

Figure 23, 24

This meeting was staged during a residency at The Rex Cramphorn Studio, at The University of Sydney, specifically for the purposes of video documentation. It was shot by Richard Manner and Maria Barbagallo, and many thanks are due to them both, along with The Department of Theatre and Performance Studies, and Solomon Thomas for assistance editing the footage together. Participants for this meeting were: Lawrence Ashford, Jimmy Dalton, Ian Maxwell, Harry McGee and Malcolm Whittaker. All participants were aware this was a public performance, but it did not seem to change the nature of the meeting.

The meeting can be viewed at https://youtu.be/Vd-Rz3ye0pc
PERFORMANCE TEXT
Meditation Script

An example of the meditation text delivered to commence Ignoramus Anonymous meetings.

Begin in your seat, a seat in the midst of your life. Be present in this moment, and no where else.

Become comfortable in your chair in the seated position that best suits you. Find a posture in your chair where your back can be erect but not stiff. Embody a sense of dignity and of confidence. Bring your awareness to your mind and body in this moment.

Regulate your breathing, focus on the breath in and the breath out.

Now consider this name that I have just introduced you each with.

Begin to take into account your full family name, which I did not use in this introduction. My full name is Malcolm Whittaker. What is your full name?

This is the title with which so much of your life revolves around. It was probably given to you by your parents, though perhaps it has been altered or adopted since then.

Let’s go back to your original name at the time of your birth.

Begin to consider what this title means.

Begin to consider why you were given this title in particular.

Take this analysis back one step further by considering how you happen to be born in the first place. That is - How did you parents come together to meet and to mate? Did your parents consciously decide to have a child? Do you happen to know that for sure? Could your life on this planet be complete accident?

Give this same consideration to your parents. How did they come to be born?

What cities were your parents born in? If they were born in different cities - Why did they move through space so that their paths would intersect?
Amid all the wars, earthquakes, famines and other disasters of human history - How did those genetic strains which combined in you, through your parents, manage to survive when so many other genetic strains disappeared?

Can you estimate how many migrations, wars of conquest and economic upheavals led to the genetic strains of your father and mother coming together to produce you and give you this name that you go by?

If you happen to find your mind wandering, then that’s quite alright. Just gently bring yourself back to this task, to answer the question - How did this continent on which we now sit emerge through geological evolution?

In your own way, however rough or vague, attempt to account for the formation of the planet and the appearance and evolution of life on Earth up until your naming rite.

Why is this planet capable of supporting life, and why did it produce the kind of life that would dream up and undertake an exercise such as that which we are doing now? Why would you do an exercise such as this?

Now with this thought, bring your attention hurtling toward the present.

How & Why did you come to be in the City of Sydney right now of all the cities on this planet?

Consider your interactions over the last twelve months or so...

Sometime ago I could not find my toothbrush in the bathroom of my home in Sydney. I looked where I believed to be everywhere and eventually rang my partner believing perhaps she had misplaced it, for some reason. She told me it was in the cupboard behind the mirror over the sink. Despite living in this house for some years now I had no idea there was a cupboard behind that mirror.

I recently voted in the federal election. I voted below the line for the first time on the large piece of paper which I believe represented our Senate, although I did not understand the entirety of what my vote supported or represented. This lead me to return to previous feelings I have had on the nature on ‘compulsory voting’ and this being undemocratic, as it compels ignorant choices. This then lead to feelings of a sort of Western guilt when taking into account all those who shed blood around the world in order to attain the rite of being able to vote in a democracy. This then lead to further feelings of guilt when I realised I could not name countries where this bloodshed is the case, let alone locate these countries on a world map.
Speaking of the location of countries on a world map, at a previous meeting of *Ignoramus Anonymous* a young woman confessed to not knowing where the Torres Straight Islands are. She was particularly embarrassed by this because she comes into contact with the name so often. Do you know where the Torres Straight Islands are? Do you know why they are where they are, instead of being somewhere else? Why are they known to us as the Torres Straight Islands, instead of by another name? Why do they exist at all?

Bring your attention closer still to the present.

Just today I was mulling over the fact that children are not allowed into licensed premises, such as pubs and casinos, until eighteen years of age – as up until this point they are not deemed emotionally or intellectually mature enough to avoid corruption by such spaces – Yet these same children are allowed into religious premises, such as churches, synagogues and mosques, from the time of their birth. What do you think of this?

These are everyday quandaries that both can and cannot be answered by the quick Googling of a subject. Like all forms of knowledge this is information that is ultimately created, edited and orchestrated by the brain to form beliefs that hold personal truth.

The circle that you are sitting in now has been set up as a space to Google this information with each other. Not to answer questions, but to remain in a state of wonder through asking and discussing them. You might possess the knowledge that $2 + 2 = 4$, but do you know how & why 2 and 2 amount to the number 4??

In the next couple of moments, let us open our eyes and begin a respectful discussion by Googling any thoughts on your mind with one another present. This discussion could take the form of stories of times, matters, skills and subjects on which you have felt or continue to feel ignorant regarding. It could be something you were ignorant of that got you into trouble, or caused embarrassment, or it could be something nagging away at your conscience from the news or current affairs that you simply just don’t get.

When you’re ready, let’s begin.
REVIEWS AND REFLECTIONS
Gail Priest review

Gail Priest’s review of the 2014 Festival of Live Art, including reference to Ignoramus Anonymous.
Some content from the original review has been omitted for the purposes of brevity.

It’s all about you

Gail Priest: FOLA, Arts House

Attending a live art event? Make sure you go prepared. You’ll need conversational skills with subjects ranging from the banal to the topical to the personal; comfortable clothing so you’re ready for anything; and a special talent wouldn’t go astray. Can you tell a story, play an instrument? How’s your donut tossing?

Live art is all about you, the audience: your participation, your input, your content. This is framed to varying degrees by the artist in forms ranging from large-scale spectacular to intimate conversation. Well, these seemed to be the dominant modes of presentation during the Arts House weekend of the Festival of Live Art (FOLA).

The jangles

Sam Halmarack has come all the way from Bristol to do a show, but his band, the Miserablitles, have gone AWOL. It’s a simple premise, well executed including huddled whispsers from front of house staff and a delayed start. The first time I see the show (I accidentally get swept in the door for a second showing later that night) the audience is almost as uneasy as Halmarack. We know it’s a ruse, but his painful awkawardness allows for doubt, or at the very least elicits sympathy. As the minutes tick by we wonder how we’re going to pass this time together: Halmarack starts to talk about his band, and then produces a rehearsal DVD—a DIY guide to being a Miserablitle—and before long there are people playing the keyboard and glockenspiel, banging the drums and we’re all backup singers. It’s a full-
band karaoke experience. Halmarack is charming, with a quiet passion for his music—a melancholy pop that stays in your brain (annoyingly) for days—and manages to subtly deepen the experience so that it is not purely parodic.

Fascinatingly, the ten o’clock show is a very different experience. The crowd is live art cognoscenti, so accustomed to participation that they play along too hard, aggressively helpful when not asked to be and reticent when it’s required. Halmarack pulled the performance back on track, but some joy and subtlety was lost in the process. In this case fellow performers make for bad participants, competitively calling Halmarack’s bluff. Perhaps it’s good to remember that even in live art suspension of disbelief is still part of the contract.

**The speeches**

The popular live art lecture form was not prominent in FOLA, Song-Ming Ang’s charming yet too lecture-like analysis of contemporary love songs aside, but there was certainly no lack of speech-making, offering a respite from audience participation. The main speech-fest was Mish Grigor’s Man O Man created in collaboration with Bron Batten, Halcyon Macleod, Hallie Shellam, Diana Smith and Willoh S Weiland. Grigor set up the premise of a speculative future in which legislation to end the patriarchy would soon pass; we were attendees at a public meeting to vote it in. Though all the speeches had been written by women, it did come as a surprise, and possibly a disappointment to some of us, that the speeches were all delivered by men—ranging from a chauvinist and a passive aggressive SNAG to an oppressed gay boy. Although it was perplexing as we longed to hear the women’s perspective, on reflection I believe its absence gave the work a devastating depth. Grigor seems to be saying that the patriarchy will not end until men have convinced themselves that its demise is their idea. There was some great writing, some overwriting and some stage effects that didn’t work at all, the ambitious piece clearly showing its short development time, but it was certainly intriguing and I was moved when we all raised our hands in the vote that ended the patriarchy. For just a moment the dream was real.

Other speeches included Paul Gazzola’s letter to the Australia Council, calling for an independent artist representative on the Board. The speech forms part of his larger Gold Coin project which explores the idea of value, exchange and artists’ role within this system. Particularly impressive was the work-in-progress presentation by Emma Beech of her Life is Short and Long project exploring the idea of crisis, inspired by the effects of the GFC in Spain and Australia’s ongoing crisis of identity. Beech is a charismatic presenter with a sharp mind for connections, nuance and gentle humour. I look forward to seeing where this work goes.

Oh and Sarah Rodigari pulled off a heroic all-nighter with A Filibuster of Dreams, a 10-hour toast to everyone and perhaps everything she knows. I think we are only beginning to understand what she and others are demonstrating is the nature and depth of the present crisis.
only experienced the first hour, but this was a gentle and curious endurance meditation that I’d like to enjoy more fully when not so overstimulated by back-to-back events.

**The conversations**

While speeches were prevalent, the most dominant form was the conversation. Malcolm Whittaker encouraged us to share our ignorance and to draw upon others’ knowledge as an analogue Google machine. Beth Buchanan invited us into a tent to talk about how we do or do not sleep. The Live Art Escort Agency got us all self-reflexive about participation, making some fun and incisive points and Lois Weaver’s Long Table invited us to discuss everything and anything (again) in a reverent and civilised format. And that’s before the multitude of foyer conversations.

**The contact**

Less prevalent were the direct physical encounters usually found in live art. Those included were non-confrontational and pleasurable. Julie Vulcan’s Drift invited us into a curious personal nest of shredded paper where we were given an auxiliary in-ear sound track which augmented the amplified soundtrack played in the space (by Ashley Scott) and rewarded with a hand massage. James Berlyn also concentrated on the hand offering a manicure or a palm reading. I took the latter and felt quite enlightened by the results, even if he was cheating in already knowing my occupation.

**The fun**

Most of all, Arts House’s program was fun. This made for a very pleasurable weekend and certainly allowed the general public a non-threatening introduction to participatory experiences. Sam Routledge and Martyn Coutt’s I Think I Can was a great hit as audiences created stories for tiny characters inhabiting a model railway set up by a local club of enthusiasts (see image on page 36). Unable to shake my Protestant upbringing, I did wonder if I was having too much fun. Many of the works trod lightly, avoiding heavier and headier issues. Perhaps this was a deliberate curatorial choice, but I missed the presence of something truly provocative, sexy, shocking, bloody even. And I got a little tired of doing all the work, supplying the content and conversation. Call me old fashioned but I do think the artist should give me just a bit more than I’m giving them. However taken as a whole, the inaugural FOLA was big, playful and wonderfully generous.
Approaching the Unknown in
Ignoramus Anonymous

Essay by Anneke Jaspers.
Published on the Performance Space website.

Recently I read an article about Google's largely secret ‘personalisation algorithms’, which are used to filter its search results.1 In theory, these work to provide users with the most relevant information. In practice, they generate a pervasive and opaque system of information bias, based on (potentially problematic) assumptions about what we want to know. While the effect of these algorithms is sometimes impossible to overlook, I had never really considered until then just how extensively Google and its equivalents might be arbitrating our knowledge formation: the ‘unknown unknowns’ that are the corollary of every foray into the encyclopedic ether of the internet.

Malcolm Whittaker’s project Ignoramus Anonymous invites participants to ‘revel in that which we do not know, and that which we do not know that we do not know’.2 The work takes the form of a support group for the ignorant, playfully appropriating the codes and conventions of group therapy. With the most minimal of staging – a circle of chairs in an intimate room – Whittaker marks out a space for this performative exchange, in which he plays the role of unassuming moderator. Naturally, there is no set agenda; rather, the work provides an open forum for discussing any topic about which participants feel ill informed, with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration or guilt. The crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations, the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, the meaning of neoliberalism. It’s all grist to the mill of Whittaker’s proposition that in our age of ‘hysterical technological immediacy’ it is easy to construct a thin veneer of knowledge on a vast number of topics, yet the increasing atomisation of our social relations means that we now know less about far more. The extent of our unknown unknowns is truly unfathomable.

Perhaps there is no better context for a work that probes the concept of ignorance in the age of the internet than the oldest library in Australia. Every month for the last year or so, the State Library of New South Wales has hosted a session of Ignoramus Anonymous in its regal Shakespeare Room.3
The sheer volume and historical significance of the Library’s collections metaphorically bear down on visitors as they cross its neoclassical threshold and enter the spectacular main chamber of the Mitchell wing, with its vaulted ceiling and dark-stained shelving pressed against the periphery. On Whittaker’s part, the juxtaposition of artwork and site is ironic and gently provocative. The Library is a self-proclaimed ‘knowledge landmark’, an emblem of institutionally sanctioned information and an antidote for ignorance.

Against this backdrop, Whittaker invites participants to embrace a ‘lack’ that is routinely suppressed in everyday life, underscoring the library’s purpose while flouting its resources. But the context also raises the spectre of what he terms ‘the cultural status of different forms of knowledge’. As the dialogue in each session progresses, typically these forms rub up against one another and reveal engrained hierarchies of value: the read above the heard, the broadcast above the blogged, the seen above the felt, and so on. Such predispositions are cast into relief by the discursive nature of the event, which gives absolute primacy to that most capricious of communication channels, the spoken word.

Like all of Whittaker’s works, *Ignoramus Anonymous* privileges a live encounter between artist and audience. Process and execution overlap. The act of making is distributed among numerous agents and ‘the work’ takes on a fragmented, durational character, dispersing into the world at the end of the meetings. At the beginning of each gathering, Whittaker delivers a monologue couched within the ritual of a meditation exercise, which deftly focuses the group’s attention. The script veers wildly across temporalities and subjects – from the intensely personal to the ethical, evolutionary and macro political – interweaving confessional and inquisitive modes of address. It sets a generous, reassuring tone and is inflected with moments of apparent vulnerability, though it is impossible to discern the ‘authenticity’ of his personal revelations in the narrative. This ambiguity is both critical and compelling. In a sense, the monologue operates as an allegory for the work at large, self-consciously representing its entanglement of play and serious enquiry, the fictionalised and ‘real’, reflective and speculative speaking positions. Whittaker’s hand in the remainder of the sessions is unobtrusive; coaxing more stirring conversation is not the agenda of his support group. The work’s strength is to be found elsewhere, beyond the generally convivial banter that forms its first layer, in the sincere self-reflexivity it prompts both during and after the fact. The realisation of some things that we don’t know, or half know, or thought we knew – and how these implicitly reflect certain attitudes and biases – can be acutely unsettling as well as genuinely transformative.

The intersection of pedagogy and performance in recent contemporary art has been a widely discussed tendency. From lecture performances to
workshops, activated archives to temporary schools, artists have sought to disrupt existing knowledge economies by generating alternative sites for information exchange. Locally, there are numerous examples of such initiatives, many by Whittaker’s generational peers. Ignoramus Anonymous shares with these an interest in generating improvised and responsive spaces of engagement, and in articulating knowledge as a form of social capital. But it also provides a distinctive counterpoint. Here, the contemplation of ignorance ‘as a cultural phenomenon’ is privileged over teaching and learning, though these may be incidental effects. By virtue of its democratic structure, the work also encourages storytelling, speculation and the contestation of different perspectives: a mode of active formation rather than passive reception. And finally, while it occupies institutions in the business of cultivating expertise, Ignoramus Anonymous circumvents the kind of ‘pedagogical aesthetics’ typically associated with the so-called educational turn in art. Materially, the work is as nimble as they come; conceptually it is rich and thought provoking, cloaking philosophical depth behind an irreverent façade.

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References:
2. Malcolm Whittaker, ‘An Introduction to Ignoramus Anonymous’, Little Book of Ignorance, self-published, Sydney, 2013, p10–11. All quotes by the artist are taken from this text, unless otherwise noted.
3. The work has also been staged at the Waverly Library, Sydney; the Festival of Live Art, Arts House, Melbourne; Launceston Library and Sawtooth ARI as part of Junction Arts Festival, Launceston; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
6. Whittaker, correspondence with the author, 7 May 2014
In July 2015 I was hired to facilitate four meetings of Malcolm Whittaker’s Ignoramus Anonymous project – a support group for the ‘ignorant’. In Whittaker’s words:

> It is a participatory performance project that has been devised for a library space. Those present sit in the traditional support group circle and, led by the artist, revel together in what they do not know and what they do not know that they do not know. This could be anything from a current matter in the news to an existential quandary to a recently completed book or trip to a modern art gallery.
> - (malcolmwhittaker.com)

The dynamics of play are taken from the qualities at stake, the resistance or acceptance of that which is ‘at play’. In Malcolm Whittaker’s Ignoramus Anonymous, ignorance is not just discussed and espoused between participants, but drives the theatricality of the artwork from a deep event: a kind of pre-human play. To explain, I’ll begin with an extended passage from the opening of Dutch historian Johan Huizinga’s Homo Ludens: Versuch einer Bestimmung des Spielelements der Kultur, first published in 1939 and reprinted for the Anglophonereadership in 1955 as the major work of cultural theory, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture.

> Play is older than culture, for culture, however inadequately defined, always presupposes human society, and animals have not waited for man to teach them their playing. We can safely assert, even, that human civilization has added no essential feature to the general idea of play. Animals play just like men. We have only to watch young dogs to see that all the essentials of human play are present in their merry gambols. They invite one another to play by a certain ceremoniousness of attitude and gesture. They keep to the rule that you shall not bit, or not bite hard, your brother’s ear. They pretend to get terribly angry [...] Even in its simplest forms on the animal level, play is more than a mere physiological phenomenon or a psychological reflex. It goes beyond the confines of purely physical or purely biological activity. It is a significant function – that
is to say, there is some sense to it. In play there is something ‘at play’ […]
- Huizinga, 1949:1

There is a baseness to Whittaker’s work. It’s a kind of ceremony or ritual that makes the (socially) private public. It stages a playful encounter with the liminal cultural space wherein we shovel endlessly our unknowingness. Indeed, this very space is not just playful, but is ‘at play’ itself. This space of exchange, its physical properties and interpersonal dynamism is, wholly, the dramatic stake.

While Whittaker, like all before him according to Huizinga, hasn’t necessarily added any essential feature to human play or an ontology thereof, what he has done is stage an encounter with what is essentially ‘at play’ throughout all social and communal dynamics: the cultural space of ignorance and the ensuing desire to learn. This quality of play drives the narrative of participation. Keeping in mind Huizinga’s account of cultural play and the imprecision and obscurity of what might be ‘at play’ during this ignorance, I should like to make two general points regarding how I encountered the artwork. Firstly as a kind of post-Brechtian dialectic – a Lehrstücke – and secondly as an account of perverse communal suspicion that couches a powerful catharsis, politic, and dramatic theatricality.

The central premise of both perspectives is the following: Whittaker’s work, as Huizinga asserts of his own, is not concerned solely with play as it manifests in culture, but also as an account of how “culture itself bears the character of play” (Huizinga, 1943:i). This is to say that the work evolves from, and bears witness to, the play of culture, not just the play in culture. Consequently, it is true that the work operates on two levels of play. The level of a playful verbal exchange and also on a deeper level of play, one far quieter than manifest through the two Canadian tourists giggling hysterically under their breathe throughout one meeting, or through the elderly man who fancied himself somewhat of an aggressive spiritual guide to the younger participants (myself included) during the last meeting I facilitated.

In Bertolt Brecht’s dramaturgy, the Lehrstücke, the ‘learning plays’, were staged with and for an audience of players. The model does away with actor/audience separation and hierarchy. The players meet, divide the roles and perform them as a self-sufficient role-play with the dialectic presented aimed at teaching and uncovering truth (albeit, for Brecht, a Marxist truth). Mimesis and verisimilitude take a back seat and, as in Whittaker’s work, the spectator-actor problematizes the issue of representation in the theatre: no characters, no roles with the call for identification, actions rather than action – what is represented is...
A Bigger Book of Ignorance

the learning process. The space of Lehrstucke is the play space beyond a conventional dichotomy of the stage and the auditorium.
- Wirth, 1999:119

Formally speaking this is an excellent descriptor of Whittaker’s dramaturgy.

Andrzej Wirth identifies the Lehrstücke as a kind of Erfahungs-theatre as opposed to Erlebnis-theatre (1999). These specific terms, as opposed to the broad Lehrstücke, are perhaps more useful in discussing Whittaker’s contemporary take on play, pedagogy, and ignorance. While both the German ‘erfahungs’ and ‘erlebnis’ translate to ‘experience’ in English, Wirth details an important distinction between the use of them as theatrical rubrics relevant to my account of Ignoramus Anonymous:

Erfahrungs-theatre is the antithesis of Erlebnis-theatre [...] a rare instance of a notion which can be expressed more concisely in German than in English. Approximately: learning by playing versus being impressed by a play; experience versus impression; didactic theatre versus culinary theatre; Lehrstück versus spectacle; theatre for doers (active) versus theatre for spectators (reactive), etc. This connotatively rich dichotomy is fundamental for the Brechtian Lehrstück/Schaustück discourse.
- Wirth, 1999:120

As a kind of contemporary Lehrstücke, Whittaker’s work seems to so willingly engage with this idea of an Erfahrungs brand experience-theatre, with some aspects more literal than others. While some participants certainly attempt to impress as a particular dynamic within the play-space of ignorance, such as the elderly gentleman’s spiritual guidance, the space as a whole (as a composite site of multiple agents willing to ‘learn by playing’) aren’t interested in being impressed. While the Canadian gigglers were most certainly doers (actors) for who they may have regarded as the spectators (reactors), their dynamic and the insolence it aroused from others reveals an ignorance of their own in their attempts to quiet them down so they could be heard clearly and proudly reveling in their own ignorance of who might have first came up with the word ‘toaster’.

Experience versus Impression seems to be a rich dynamic through which to view Whittaker’s work and the specimens that make up the culture at play throughout. Of course, I discovered that we, inside the work, must be careful to understand the dynamics we establish in either accepting or rejecting others ignorance and the way they present it (giggle, condescending, etc.). Significantly, and I think astutely, Wirth contends that “Today, any pedagogical effort in the performed Lehrstücke, if at all effective, refers to the ethos of artistic collaboration and not to indoctrination” (1999:121). This
then begs the question: Can ‘productive’ collaboration, whatever that may be theatrically, occur without ideological indoctrination, or at least an attempt thereof? And if so, can collaboration be conceived of as its own form of a kind of cultural resistance (either to the cultural aesthetics/aesthetisization of collaboration or to the ethics of empirical, goal-orientated work and sociality)? If so, then Whittaker’s work seems rather political inasmuch as a comment on neoliberalist political economies and the independent humanist subject. Perhaps others who have experienced the work can offer a more particular answer to those questions.

A curious thing occurred during the second meeting I facilitated. I opened the work with some minutes of guided meditation. The participants sit quietly (Canadians notwithstanding) with their eyes closed. I rattle off examples of ignorance from ‘my own’ experience in order to ease the participants into the following open exchange. This script is written by Whittaker, and my instruction was to change at will what I felt I should to personalise the text. During this particular opening however, my mind slipped, and I found myself detailing the time my (that is, Whittaker’s) father was in hospital with a heart condition and my ignorance of what was going on medically. In fact my own father died in 2004, and at the conclusion of the opening text I found myself feeling rather bad. Not because of any moral issue, but because I was now incredibly suspicious of the objectivity and ‘truth’ of other participants as they discussed their own ignorance and experiences. After all, I had lied (albeit inadvertently), so why wouldn’t they?

I watched and listened with an at times (almost) hostile suspicion, twitching at every laugh or condolence aroused from participant’s stories of their ignorant lives. I realised what I wanted, impossibly, ridiculously, and indeed ignorantly, was a sense of honesty and truthfulness about others ignorance. That desire and my efforts to steer and privately suss out who, if any, might be stretching their ignorance to satisfy their own invisible performative desire drives some of the theatricality of the work in that instance. I so desired to hear ‘real’ ignorance – genuine, unabashed folly. Perversity in extremis. Perhaps this desire was haunting others in the group too, pushing their own ignorant performative agenda. After all, they couldn’t have possibly known that I had lied about my ignorance (or even why I would do that). Or could they? Did they already? Is their driving force of participation a quizzical suspicion of everyone in the performance space born from the moment they enter the ignorance-arena? Is it then folly to attempt to work against the space’s (that is, our culture’s) conception as a soapbox for ignorance in the first place? The point is that this suspicion of the group’s objectivity and personal truthfulness is manifest ignorance in itself – an ignorance I must confront that is quite apart from the ignorance we detail and espouse to each other loudly during the meeting. This ignorance is quieter and somehow, like a Greek Tragedy, more
malicious. The work aestheticises this level of ignorance and play.

Is there an inherent theatricality and dramatic stake – or more generally a catharsis – in performance through [as] ignorance? That is, following Huizinga’s philosophy, not the performance and playfulness in ignorance, but the performance of ignorance, with a capital ‘I’. The performance and play of the tangible space we create for ignorance as much as ignorance itself. An Erfahrungs-theatre of ignorance. Ignorance aestheticised. An argument for ignorance both in, and as, our culture.

Bibliography
Hi Sam + Catherine,

Just a reporting on last night’s meeting of Ignoramus Anonymous. I feel like it went really well. We had six attend in total (one more joined after you left Sam). All middle-aged women. One woman actually attended when I held a very early initial trial of the project at the library in the middle of last year, so she came back as she enjoyed it so much last time. There was a similar response last night with most expressing enthusiasm in attending future meetings. I received a particular kick out of this as it was the first time I have presented the work to a group of people who were all strangers and a ‘non-arts’ crowd. I think this is a testament to the accessibility and inclusionary nature that I have prided myself in with the work.

I began the meeting, as I always do, with a simple faux-meditation in which I encouraged those in attendance to mull over the grand history of the Universe and the small role which they play within it. This then lead to my breaking of the ice with my own personal confessions of ignorance before opening it up to the group to do the same, and facilitate a discussion around everything which is raised.

Points raised included ignorance of family histories; like one’s family-tree, where your name descends from, what your name ‘means’ and whether any of that is important to know. The difference of this was debated between Eastern and Western contexts, and what might in fact be lost by the hysterical documentation of everything in modern society - particularly the videoing, photographing, and accumulating of absolutely every mundanity that life has to offer, which you will most likely never look at again. Why do we do this? We discussed whether published books should be trusted more than the internet, and how the hell would you fix your toilet if it broke? No one seemed to know and we wondered why such pragmatic life skills such as this weren’t taught in school, instead of what could be seen as some largely irrelevant other aspects of the school curriculum. This lead to the debating of the cultural value of a range of different forms of skill/knowledge/understanding and a democratic approach to appreciating a range of forms in their own shining context. None of us could rationally justify that the Earth revolves around the Sun, rather
than perches on the back of a giant tortoise, and nor could we comprehend
the gross inflation of property prices in Sydney across the last 30 - 40 years.

Whether any of this is useful for you to know, I am not sure? I also wonder
whether reporting it is interesting outside of the context of the ‘support group
meeting’? It was certainly a fun iteration of the project and I would deem it a
success, despite not a full attendance of RSVPs - which Sam and I discussed
is always going to be difficult with free events, but Ignoramus Anonymous
does really need to be free. For six to attend such a curious project at its first
staging though I think is a good start, and I genuinely believe that we could
pick up steam (and more punters!) with a sense of regularity of meeting
fixtures. Shall we pursue further next year?...

Please find attached here an invoice for last nights gig, and a let me know
if you would like anything further on how it went. Happy to oblige, and it’s
actually quite for me to reflect in writing too - and not something I would
normally do. Ta.

Thanking you both.

Bests,

Malcolm. x
An Artist’s Ignorant Turn

Peer reviewed journal article by Malcolm Whittaker.
Published in *Performance Matters*.

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**Introduction**

Throughout 2013 and 2014 monthly meetings of my project *Ignoramus Anonymous* were held at libraries throughout Sydney, as well as in gallery and festival contexts across Australia. *Ignoramus Anonymous* is a support group for ignorance and participatory performance work that involves coming together with strangers to share and revel in what you do not know, and what you do not know that you do not know. In so doing, each meeting provides collective support for the ignorance that is latent in every individual, from the everyday to the increasingly complex. Nothing new is necessarily learnt at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, but the support offered is a form of pedagogy in itself.

That *Ignoramus Anonymous* is simultaneously a support group for ignorance and a participatory performance work is integral to the project. I will assert, after French philosopher Jacques Rancière, that the self-containment of the support group employs a “self-sufficiency” that does not rend art and life into separate spheres. It is the appearance of a form of life in which art is not art (Rancière 2002, 136). I will argue that the support group form that I employ brings a temporary micro-community together in which intellectual emancipation is theoretically possible because it involves turning away from explication by another and turning toward self-analysis, ignorance, and the unknown. To make this argument I will begin with an outline of the project, chronicling its development in relation to Rancière, and how the event is framed and orchestrated through “dialogical aesthetics” (Kester 2004). Then I will position the project in relation to the “educational turn” in contemporary art observed by curator and critical theorist Irit Rogoff and focus on what possibilities reside in the turning toward ignorance and what *Ignoramus Anonymous* might achieve in doing this. Finally, I will draw on the voices of participants of the support group as “productive irritants” (Schneider and Wright 2006) to clarify my argument and provide the necessary objectivity to provoke an active ongoing debate.

I offer this analysis as practice-based research, from my perspective as the artist behind the work, where I am what critical Grant Kester refers to as a “context provider” rather than a “content provider” (Kester 2004, 1). In *Ignoramus Anonymous*, the context I provide is a space to converse and reflect on ignorance, and I do so through adopting the social form of the support group.

**My Adventure Toward Ignorance Begins**

In 2012, I was Artist-in-Residence at Waverley Council in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. This meant that I was provided a free artist studio space to use as I wished for six months, and in exchange for this I had to provide a “community benefit project” that stemmed from my art practice. At the time, I was reading Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), which chronicles French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot’s “intellectual adventure” in 1818 whereby he discovered that he was able to teach what he himself did not know: the Flemish language. He concluded that not only was knowledge not necessary to teach, but explication was also not necessary to the act of learning. The results of his radical examination of pedagogy led him to announce that all
people were equally intelligent, including himself and his students, and that it was only in the will to use intelligence that people differ. Jacotot referred to his philosophical methodology as “intellectual emancipation.” Rancière uses the case of the Jacotot methodology to elucidate his own position on emancipation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and he further extends his position in *The Emancipated Spectator*, in which he applies these ideas to artistic practice. Rancière reconciles the learning student with the art viewer, musing that in both cases there is a stultifying logic of straight uniform transmission. “There is a something on one side—a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind—and it must pass to the other side” (Rancière 2009, 14). What you must see, feel, and think, as both student and spectator, is what is communicated to you. Rancière calls for such stultification to be overthrown, and to establish an emancipation from this problem of one-way uniform transmission of content.

The Jacotot story inspired me to undertake an adventure of my own. I began to consider orchestrating a school of ignorance as my community benefit project for the Waverley Council residency, similar to the “universal teaching” method developed by Jacotot. In the project, a range of local people would teach a range of subjects that they did not know. My rationale was that this could be a method for discovery, because both those teaching and those learning would be unburdened by the known and prescribed, and so the results would be in flux with unknown possibilities. As a nascent idea, it was an ironic subversion of what constituted a “benefit” for the community in the first place, particularly in the wake of the fraught ethics regarding “benefits for the community” observed by critics like Claire Bishop. Bishop articulates these ethics most comprehensively in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, in which she seeks a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of such work, rather than discussing these practices solely in positivist terms and focusing on demonstrable “impact” (Bishop 2012, 18). Rancière’s point in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is not to prove “that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be achieved under that supposition” (Ranciere 1991, 46). For Bishop, this means that equality is a method or working principle rather than a goal. Equality is continually verified by being put into practice (Bishop 2012, 266). Exploring such a supposition and its verification through practice was to become the centre of my burgeoning project.

What subjects would actually be delved into and “taught” at this school of ignorance, I wondered. There was so much that I was personally ignorant about that I was not sure where to begin. In a brief survey of locals I met with on the idea, there seemed to be a degree of difficulty for everyone in discussing what they did not know, and how their particular ignorance might be harnessed. Maybe a school of ignorance is not what was needed at all, I thought. Maybe I had exposed what was a genuine need for the community. That need was a space to discuss all this ignorance, the sheer extent of which was halting progress on realizing this initial idea of orchestrating a school of ignorance.

The focus of the community benefit project shifted from subverting a transaction of knowledge to being a support group for the overwhelming lack of knowledge that I believed everyone grappled with (or hid from) on a daily basis. My provocation was that when something is encountered in life that is not understood, then it should be questioned. If it is not questioned, then ignorance is being hidden from, even with gracious acceptance. The support group was to be a space to admit our ignorance by tapping into child-like questioning, a performance that encouraged a transformative turn toward the unknown. This shift that the work took was the first emancipatory turn of the project, because it meant that the work was now a conversation between equals rather than involving the power structure of a presiding “school teacher” figure. This is what emancipation means for Rancière: “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (Rancière 2009, 19). Because a support group space lacked the power structure of such a boundary, I had
the hunch that it was charged with alternative possibilities to those of a conventional educational space. As the work manifested, I continued to examine how this might or might not be the case. I noticed, for example, that a support group for ignorance might embody such an idea of emancipation because the unanswerable questions raised through the meeting devolved pre-existing intellectual authorities and assumed logics and that the collective body of a micro-community could form in their place. In these temporary micro-communities, an equality could be observed in our ignorance. This is not to say that I was developing a utopic state with an assessable efficacy. Rather that, through Rancière’s thinking on education and emancipation, Ignoramus Anonymous was exploring what can be achieved under the supposition that collectively turning toward what we don’t know and understand can create equality. For Rancière, “equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified” (Rancière 1991, 137) and through providing the context of a support group for ignorance I was researching how it might be practised or verified.4

When it came time to deliver my community benefit project, I held a support group for ignorance in a side room of the Waverley Council Library. I titled the project Ignoramus Anonymous, after Alcoholics Anonymous, and billed it as “a support group for the ignorant, i.e. for anyone and everyone.” In attendance were a handful of community members, council staff, and colleagues of mine. On arrival, I welcomed each individual and offered them wine and hors d’oeuvres and encouraged them to take a seat in a circle of chairs I had arranged in advance. When it was time to begin I re-introduced the event and what it was all about and asked the group to share confessions of their ignorance.

The result was rather forced, and no one really wanted to join in. It did not help that there was a “know-it-all” in the group who put people off by lecturing those that did put forward their ignorance. I should have gently reeled him in to explain that this was not a space for teaching but a place for support, and his condescension was entirely unsupportive. I did continue to encourage him to share his own ignorance throughout the event, but he was not interested or willing to do so, and such a position became common in a number of future meetings of the project. What makes the actions of such individuals into “bad characters” in the group is that they assert themselves into a role of master-explicator, which as Rancière says “stultifies by telling [others] that they can’t learn without him” (Rancière 1991, 28). Explication is not called for or wanted at Ignoramus Anonymous, and when it happens the hierarchy we are turning away from becomes palpable and the community fractured.

The feedback from this community benefit project presentation, which was essentially a trial of the work, was that I had tried a little too hard to get people to dive right in and talk about their ignorance. It was felt that the unease from this beginning stayed throughout the meeting. Apart from this criticism, feedback was promising, and there was a consensus that genuine benefits could be envisioned from such an event in the future. Benefits speculated on included the creative and critical faculties that the “think-space” inspired, talking through alternate perspectives on life, hubristic flaws as entertainment to learn from, and even free therapy. In debriefing, I recognized the “art of conversation” necessary in the craft of the performance of my role, that role being to facilitate invisibly in a more subtle hands-off fashion. The “art must tear itself away from the territory of aestheticized life,” as Rancière wrote (Rancière 2002, 147), and I must “disappear” as the artist and become one with/of the support group.
An Adventure in Context Over Content

Some months passed and then the Australia Council for the Arts launched a new grant to fund artist residencies at organizations where artist residency programs were not yet in place. The short-lived program sounded similar to a government-funded version of the British initiative led by artist couple Barbara Steveni and John Latham in the 1960s, the Artist Placement Group (APG):

The [APG] was premised on the idea that art has a useful contribution to make to the world, and that artists can serve society—not by making works of art, but through their verbal interactions in the context of institutions and organisations. To this end [APG] organized placements or residencies for British artists in a range of private corporations and public bodies. (Bishop 2012, 164)

The APG’s slogan was “the context is half the work,” and it operated on the principle of pushing the artist out into society (Bishop 2012, 166). Like the Australia Council initiative, the APG was not only interested in the production of artwork as an outcome but also in reciprocal exchange, and learning and development from both parties. I managed to acquire myself one of these grants, making me artist in residence of the State Library of New South Wales. I was an “incidental person” (Bishop 2012, 164) at the organization, which was how the APG referred with much tactical humility to the artists that they organized residencies for, and I would use the residency to focus on Ignoramus Anonymous.

Context was half the work for me as well. Or even more than half the work. Context is what I am providing as an artist with Ignoramus Anonymous. This is how Grant Kester describes artists using a performative process-based approach, using the words of British artist Peter Dunn to articulate such artists as being “context providers” rather than “content providers” (Kester 2004, 1). Like Dunn’s work, my practice also involves the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations, beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum (Kester 2004, 1). The context of Ignoramus Anonymous facilitated the manifestation of unknown content as a by-product of participating in self-analysis and verification, much like the context of Jacotot’s pedagogical method, in which no pre-determined content is transferred either.

The first context for Ignoramus Anonymous was in situating itself in a similar space beyond the confines of an art institution, somewhere where the work would have a greater resonance and be more appropriate. I thought of the library as a perfect location for the work, where it would importantly also not be seen as “art” but more as an everyday “event” in a public program. The second context for Ignoramus Anonymous was in the orchestration of the meeting itself. For this context of dialogical aesthetics, Kester suggests an image of the artist “defined in terms of openness, of listening . . . and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator” (Kester 2004, 110). This is what I looked at harnessing in my second context, creating within the meeting a space of generosity from the commencement of the event.

I came to the idea of beginning the meeting with some guided meditation. I wrote a meditation text that focused on encouraging growing reflection on how little it was possible to know in life. I inserted honest examples of my own ignorance, and the text became demonstrative of how the project functioned. Through the meditation text, I was able to establish the performance from within the performance, without the terse outlining of rules or the need to encourage that I had commenced with in the earlier iteration of the project, or indeed without any frame of the performance as “art” at all. It was a Rancièrian refuting of “the hierarchical divisions of the
perceptible” and the “framing [of] a common sensorium (Rancière 2002, 150–51). For art historian Sophie Berrebi, Rancière’s framing of a sensorium is the framing of “a way of being” but “in a context in which art has not been attributed a specific place” (Berrebi 2008, 2). It is the framing of a consensual community “in which the spiritual sense of being-in-common is embedded” (Rancière 2010, 81). Now the sensorium of Ignoramus Anonymous began with my welcoming of individuals as they trickled in at the advised start time, based on advertisements for “Ignoramus Anonymous, a support group for ignorance,” and I would memorize each person’s name as I met them on arrival. I would offer them some hospitality and encourage them to take a seat in a circle of chairs. I would bring the meeting to a start by saying how good it was to see everyone there. I would go around the circle saying the name of everyone present. I would then explain that the event begins with some guided meditation to establish the meeting. I would suggest that it is best done with eyes closed, if agreeable, and then I would proceed with the meditation text.

Is there something that has caused you trouble or embarrassment? Something nagging away at your conscience from the news or current affairs? Something seemingly nonsensical that’s always puzzled you?

Ignoramus Anonymous is a support group for the ignorant (i.e. for anyone and everyone), for reveling in what we do not know, and what we do not know that we do not know.

It is a space to ask questions and receive support. A supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be safely confessed as we share our limitations of knowledge and understanding. Through a simple circle, in which our ignorance forces us to confront a democratic equality with one another, our support will propose an intellectual emancipation and an equality of intelligence in all.

Ignoramus Anonymous invitation example, which advertised the project at the libraries. Logo: Marissa Gillies, 2013.

At the conclusion of the meditation, there was often a pause as those present would open their eyes and look around the circle, waiting for someone else to speak and raise their own ignorance first. I would wait too, only intervening if someone looked like they had something they wanted to say but needed a little encouragement. Someone always had something to share and would do so after this initial moment passed, and then a question would be proposed.

From this point on the meeting would unfold, over the course of an hour, as what media critic Gail Priest referred to as an “analogue Google machine” (Priest 2014). As an analogy, it positions the support group circle as a DIY search engine that reconfigures the knowledge/ignorance and understandings/misunderstandings of those present as the content of the work. The meeting exposes that knowledge and understanding are more lacking than first thought (particularly when cut off from the Internet). At Ignoramus Anonymous, we self-produce knowledge and understanding by reconfiguring our typical relationship with it, which is frequently a relationship of passive consumption to a superior master source. As Rancière points out, “the student is emancipated if he is obliged to use his own intelligence” (Rancière 1991, 15), and at Ignoramus Anonymous attendees have this obligation.

The mere consumption of knowledge is described in a foundational text of critical pedagogy, Pedagogy of the Oppressed (1970) by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, as a “banking” model of education, in which a teacher deposits knowledge to the student. For Freire, this
reinforces similar subjugation and oppression in the learning individual, rather than inspiring awareness of their position as a historical subject capable of producing change. Bishop points out that Rancière omits from The Ignorant Schoolmaster the emergence of the critical pedagogy of the 1960s by the likes of Freire, despite similarities in championing an empowerment of learning subjects. She notes: “Unlike Rancière, it is significant that Freire maintains that hierarchy can never be entirely erased” (Bishop 2012, 266). For Freire, “dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum. Dialogue takes place inside some programme and content. These conditioning factors create tension in achieving goals that we set for dialogic education” (Freire 1987, 102). What the program of Ignoramus Anonymous seeks to do, through playing with the social form of a support group as performance (and with the conditioning factors that permeate intellectual hierarchies), is reconfigure goals of dialogic education: to encourage a turn toward ignorance, not necessarily for the pragmatic acquisition of knowledge, but to critically understand the possibility for equality therein. Ignoramus Anonymous proposes, like Rancière, that “we don’t know that men are equal. We are saying that they might be . . . and we are trying . . . to verify it. But we know that this might is the very thing that makes a society of humans possible” (Rancière 1991, 73). That verification is taking place through the critical occupation of the social form of the support group.

An Adventure Through Social Form

Adopting social forms is part of what I do as an artist. In the 2011 “Creative Time Summit” on the major retrospective of socially engaged art Living as Form, artist and academic Ted Purves quoted sociologist Georg Simmel to define social form as “the mode of interaction among individuals through or in a shape [in] which specific content achieves social reality” (Purves 2011). The achievement of social reality through social form, for Simmel, is constituted by “reciprocal influencing” (Simmel 1909, 297) within the given mode of interaction. Purves delineates “social form” from “social content,” with the content being the interest, purpose, or motivation of the interaction, and the interaction being the form. It is a space where reciprocal influencing is at play within the content, and the content achieves reality through the use of the social form.

I use existing social forms as ready-mades for re-framing as spaces in which audiences and collaborators participate in the work as a live performance. For me, the social form acts in place of Rancière’s crucial third term in the process of the emancipation of the spectator: “spectacle” (Rancière 2007, 278). Rancière’s spectacle, which derives from a Debordian situationist critique, mediates between the artist’s idea and the spectator’s feeling and interpretation, and he suggests that the spectacle produced by the artist is the thing to which these two other terms can refer in the process of emancipation. The occupation of the social form is similarly crucial for me in the process of emancipation, but the decisive difference is that the essence of human activity is not distanced or alienated from us in the exteriority of social form in the first place. The social form links people; it does not separate them, as Guy Debord observed the spectacle to do in his 1967 work of philosophy and critical theory The Society of the Spectacle (Debord 1994). It is my assertion that the shared space of the social form in Ignoramus Anonymous prevents stultification and that within the performance of social form the “aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that and” (Rancière 2002, 134). Rancière’s italicized and is interpreted by Bishop as the necessary tension held between art and the social (Bishop 2012, 278). The performance of social form holds that tension, not collapsing the two but oscillating between the art and the social without ever quite being entirely one or the other.

In 1818, Jacotot used the bilingual edition of François Fénelon’s Télémaque (1699), from which the students learned Flemish through comparing and contrasting with the French text they
understood. The book, for Rancière, represented the mediation between Jacotot as the pedagogue and his students. For Rancière, this book being foreign to both master and student is integral in his provocation toward intellectual emancipation, as “to prevent stultification there must be something between master and student” (Rancière 2007, 278). It was the “third term” to which the teacher and student could refer in the process of emancipation. In 2012, with Ignoramus Anonymous, my exploration of this provocation used the social form of the support group as a participatory performance that placed the mediation not just between an audience and myself, but around us in a temporal, self-mediating and democratic circle. A circle fittingly has no beginning/end or front/back, and when sitting in a circle everyone is equally viewable to everyone else. Education researchers Gert Biesta and Charles Bingham interpret such all-inclusivity as at the heart of democracy for Rancière (Biesta and Bingham 2010). It is my assertion that the support group circle is democratic for this reason and that the actions engaged in through the inclusive support group for ignorance are democratizing for this same reason.

The materiality of Jacotot’s copy of Télémaque kept two minds at an equal distance, those of Jacotot and his students, whereas explication would have been “the annihilation by of one mind by another” (Rancière 1991, 32). Ignoramus Anonymous uses the support group to hold minds at an equal distance by similarly removing the act of explication and encouraging a turn together toward ignorance. For writer and researcher Steve Corcoran, the key principle of Jacotot’s universal teaching method is to “go against yourself” (Corcoran 2016), in so doing understanding how you learn and the identifications you make, and demanding verification of what you say and think. The same can be said of the “turn” in Ignoramus Anonymous, in which those present demand a similar verification. It is a turn against ourselves and toward our ignorance. It is an ignorant turn in the wake of the much-discussed educational turn in contemporary art.

**An Adventure in Turning**

In her analysis of what has become known as the “educational turn” in art, Irit Rogoff reflects that learning itself is a series of “turns.” She suggests that in a turn we are activated, as we shift away from something or toward or around something, and in so doing we learn. For Rogoff, in a turn, it is fittingly who we are, rather than what it is, that is in movement (Rogoff 2008). It is we who do the turning rather than the subject. The subject in the case of Rogoff’s argument is education and the act of pedagogy itself. Rogoff calls for artistic practices to capture both the dynamics of a turn and the kind of activation that is released in the process of a turn. Advocacy for this drive that is released in the process of the educational turn in art is advocacy for the very act of shifting toward education in the public reception of artistic projects that deal with pedagogical aesthetics. Rogoff has difficulty reconciling this call, though, noting herself as being guilty at times of a fixation on the initial turn, toward education for the artist and curator, rather than what it releases in the viewers’ experience of the artwork. It should be the viewer turning toward education and the act of learning, but for Rogoff the educational turn in art was a shift in artistic practice that did not necessarily lead to a shift in reception for commensurate “rethinking” by the viewer. The artist was turning but not necessarily the public. The educational turn in art signaled a shift away from . . . dominant aesthetics towards an insistence on the unchartable, processual nature of any creative enterprise. Yet . . . has led all too easily into the emergence of a mode of “pedagogical aesthetics” in which a table in the middle of the room, a set of empty bookshelves, a growing archive of assembled bits and pieces, a classroom or lecture scenario, or the promise of a conversation have taken away the burden to rethink and dislodge daily those dominant burdens ourselves. (Rogoff 2008)

For Rogoff, conversation was the most significant shift in the art world in the decade preceding her
In his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Kester champions “dialogical aesthetics” in which oral communication is the prominent centre around which the artwork revolves. Kester, like Rogoff, is interested in conversation for the possibility of outcomes outside of art institutions, and not simply for the avenue it provides to subvert dominant artworld paradigms. The artistic practices of verbal communication articulated by Kester can be observed to have many similarities with the pedagogical aesthetics in the educational turn noted by Rogoff. Indeed, the call from both Rogoff and Kester is for the turning of artistic practice to affect further turning in the public experience of the work, as both individuals and a collective, resulting in genuine *transformation*.

Transformation results from the rethinking and dislodging of dominant burdens. Rogoff refers to pedagogy as a dominant burden. The cause of the burden can be interpreted via Rancière’s argument that the very act of pedagogy is necessarily subjugating of the individual because it asserts a primary authority from which knowledge is transferred. A dominant daily burden for the individual is more specifically on the other side of the pedagogical process, in what is *unknown* to them but *known* by someone else. This burden is a subjugating one for Rancière because what is unknown to the student is known by a therefore always superior pedagogue.

The artist is also always in a more knowing and superior place than the spectator of their work. Even in fields of naïve art and outsider art, where the artwork is produced by those who are untrained, or children, or have a disability, the artist still holds the superior position in the reception of their work because content is transferring from their side to the side of the viewer, usually in a one-way fashion at their instigation. For artists engaged in pedagogical aesthetics, then, rather than a turn toward education and what is known and transferred by one party or source to the other, what might be provoked by a focus on what is not known and a turn together with viewers toward shared collective *ignorance* and the *unknown*?

On a daily basis, each of us turns away from our ignorance. We do this to save face, to avoid embarrassment and conflict (both internal and external), and to retain the sense of identity that we have founded on what we believe we know. Cosmologist Carl Sagan gives an example of this in his introduction to theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking’s *A Brief History of Time* (1988), where he notes that it is only children who do not know enough to avoid stopping to ask really clever questions (Hawking 1988, ix). One such question might be: “Why does time move forward and not backward?” Adults on the receiving end of this question are most likely then confronted with their lack of understanding and ability to explain what is a fundamental law that governs life as we know it, particularly without sounding condescending to the child. In this case, the learning process that unfolds will likely trigger further questions in a situation more akin to an active conversation than the stultifying form of a lecture, in which the side of the student is often rendered subordinate.8

Imagine the humorous situation where the child continues to ask “Why?” in response to every answer the adult continues to give. The adult is increasingly confronted with his or her own ignorance as what is raised continues to feed back into the conversation in a reciprocal fashion. Every piece of knowledge drawn upon to answer the pesky child will only require more knowledge for clarification and confirmation, to a farcically infinite degree. Philosopher Roland Barthes makes the observation that writing is made up of a ready-formed dictionary of words that are only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely (Barthes 1977, 146). Similarly, an understanding of one particular subject only exists in its interplay with the understanding of other subjects, in such a way as to never rest on any of them, and suggests that conveying the understanding of any subject “can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior,
never original” (Barthes 1977, 146). Such a notion becomes palpable in this situation of a child’s questioning, which is a situation at the heart of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting. We continue to question each other, devolving the capacity for explication and overthrowing intellectual mastery. Our “questions alone will be true questions compelling the autonomous exercise of [our] intelligence” (Rancière 1991, 30) because we have admitted our ignorance.

Confronting the inevitable lack of understanding and knowledge we have is a humbling experience. This experience, of facing how truly little we know, can characterize the beginning of a transformative turn. The transformation of this turn is not only the shattering of personal hubris. In the turn is also the release of an awareness of how little it is possible to know in life, and as such how little everyone else knows as well. The gaining of this personal insight when being questioned by a child, or at a support group for ignorance, could in itself be seen as the discovery of knowledge in the sense that “unknown unknowns” are made into “known unknowns.” Such a taxonomy of ignorance coincides with psychology professor Michael J. Smithson’s articulation of the most popular distinction when it comes to ignorance as being “knowing that we don’t know and not knowing that we don’t know” (Smithson 2008, 210).

Not knowing the unknown is key to the theory of subjugation for Rancière too. He notes in The Emancipated Spectator: “what the pupil will always lack, unless she becomes a schoolmistress herself, is knowledge of ignorance—a knowledge of the exact distance separating knowledge from ignorance” (Rancière 2009, 9). This is what empowers the schoolmaster. Reaching the known unknowns through the innocent questioning from a child or from Ignoramus Anonymous has come through sharing a reflective conversation and not a superior source, like a teacher or textbook that renders one subordinate. Such a teacher or textbook is always one step ahead in knowing the distance separating knowledge from ignorance. In so doing, this ignorant turning through reciprocal conversation and questioning, as opposed to educational turning, can be seen to represent an emancipation from the everyday hierarchy of intelligence.

In her reflection on the problematic educational turn in contemporary art, Claire Bishop dedicates an entire chapter of Artificial Hells to the subject, titled “Pedagogical Projects.” She discusses artists such as Joseph Beuys, Tania Bruguera, and Thomas Hirschhorn in terms of their concern for education in their work. Locally, some of my peers were also showing an interest in the educational turn at the time of my developing Ignoramus Anonymous. Lara Thoms’ The Experts Project and Dara Gill’s The Knowledge Barter Experiment displayed an interest in knowledge economies and information exchange. Both are examples of local Australian artists who have developed projects that implement processes of teaching and learning, encouraging participants to identify areas of their own expertise and positing these participants as teachers, employing the democratic sensibility of many barter-based exchanges where teacher becomes student and vice versa (Meagher 2011, 27). Ignoramus Anonymous, on the other hand, is about an emphatic turn away from what is known and can be transferred by teacher or student, or indeed artist or spectator, and a turn toward what is unknown and nontransferable. While Thoms and Gill engaged a playful subversion of the explicator role, this role was still in fact in place. Writer and curator Anneke Jaspers considers this the distinctive counterpoint of Ignoramus Anonymous:

Here, the contemplation of ignorance “as a cultural phenomenon” is privileged over teaching and learning. . . . By virtue of its democratic structure, the work also encourages storytelling, speculation and the contestation of different perspectives: a mode of active formation rather than passive reception . . . while it occupies institutions in the business of cultivating expertise, Ignoramus Anonymous circumvents the kind of “pedagogical aesthetics” typically associated with the so-called educational turn in art. (Jaspers 2014)
My argument is that *Ignoramus Anonymous* makes this circumvention through the playing with/of a distinctive social form, taking the work beyond being an artwork involving pedagogy and into simultaneously being the autonomous event of a support group. As such, it is important for me to now turn to the voices of others who participated in the event.

**An Adventure With Others**

The reconfiguring of the support group form and the initial turning toward ignorance begins with the meditation text at the commencement of each *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting. Jaspers refers to this opening as a monologue that “operates as an allegory for the work at large, self-consciously representing its entanglement of play and serious enquiry,” after which my “hand in the remainder of the sessions is unobtrusive” (Jaspers 2014). Indeed, theatre-maker and writer Mark Rogers noted that after this opening the meetings tended to follow a pattern of:

1. Someone revealing their ignorance. 2. Someone else informing them or speculating an answer to the lacked knowledge. 3. The group deciding this practice of “filling in the gap in knowledge” to be not in the spirit of the session and then proceeding without too much more correcting or informing etc. (Rogers 2016)

Rogers’ suggestion of this “spirit” of the group highlights the disappearance of myself as the artist, a disappearance recognized by dramaturge Jennifer Medway, who notes that I wasn’t “positioned as authority from the moment the questioning started and instead became another participant” (Medway 2016). Medway considers that the support group formula has a beginning but not necessarily an ending and that this is important. “It’s a form that has no final requirement (no required denouement/climax/third act/required resolution of a conflict)” (Medway 2016), and so the artist is no longer central once the meeting has been begun. This aligns with Rancière’s assertion that “the circle of emancipation must be begun” (Rancière 1991, 16) in that I am calling the meeting to order, and in so doing drawing the metaphoric circle of emancipation through the quite literal support group circle. For Rogers, there was a feeling of a sense of a script or behavioural code embedded in the social form of the support group. He suggested that perhaps “it is this minimal level of ‘playing along’ that allows the group to be so open with each other . . . using the ‘fiction’ to arrive at the actual feeling of connection” (Rogers 2016). Here Rogers use of the term “fiction” can be read as the representation of a support group that proves real through the community it forms, through a Ranciérien art and non-art tension held in place through the fiction. For Rancière fiction is not a term that “designates the imaginary from the real; it involves a re-framing of the ‘real’ . . . building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (Rancière 2010, 141), and I believe this to be the fiction of *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

There is a distinction between those who would have experienced the project as a participatory performance and those who would have experienced the project as entirely legitimate support group. Medway wondered if she perhaps thought of herself differently within the project than the rest of the group because she came with knowledge of my past work, and if she felt a sense of superiority because she knew the artistic frame of the project, whereas she was of the opinion that others were present at an actual support group meeting (Medway 2016). This is in contrast to her aforementioned view of me as no longer an authority within the project. In the space of the performance, I was not an authority to Medway, but she internally thought of herself as an authority. Medway also wondered if she retained perceived hierarchies around class, level of education, sobriety, and the mental health status of others present at the meetings she attended. Medway had this inclination seemingly because of her insight into the performance frame. Regardless, both she and Rogers agreed that a certain “levelling of a playing field” was made
through the ignorant turn of the meeting.¹⁴

Such is the tension that was at play in the meeting that it is impossible to reconcile the project as either wholly “performance” or “support group.” It is also impossible to assess the actual emancipation and transformation attained through the project. Artist Christie Woodhouse wrote of the “glimpse of potential of emancipation” she experienced in the project and the feeling of an “invitation and gentle support” to go further if one wished (Woodhouse 2016). It this potential in the project that I am writing of here and that Rancière wrote of in The Ignorant Schoolmaster. Both are about contexts for what is potential.

That potential was found for artist Jane Grimley through the opening meditation, which she felt guided her, as she put it, “into a safe place of ignorance with strangers and it felt enough like a playful game that I was ready to be irreverent with my own ignorance and that of others” (Grimley 2016). Grimley, the most frequent attender of all Ignoramus Anonymous meetings, “started to consider all meditations as some sweet acceptance of the empty vessel” that she felt individuals ultimately were. Such an expression corresponds with thoughts that arose for me throughout the project: that we are all equally ignorant of the infinite amount of what there is to know. Consider this understanding as represented in the diagram below:

![Diagram representing the sphere of the known, surrounded by the infinite unknown.](image)

Some people may feel like they know more than others, or they might actually know more, or what they know might possess more cultural value or cachet and provide them with a higher paying or more lucrative job. In fact, we are all ignorant. Our ignorance surrounds us. We each live in a bubble of belief, familiarity, and specialization, a bubble of what we know.

Consider this bubble as more of a sphere, with an individual at the centre. The sphere can grow, when, for example, swing-dancing classes are taken, or where a country is on a map is learned, or when one becomes aware of certain machinations of how their place of employment works. What is known is increasing, and so too is the sphere that the individual occupies. The sphere might even grow to be bigger than the spheres of others. The size of these spheres becomes a
hierarchy, particularly in how the content is valued by other people in other spheres. One primary evaluation of the content of a sphere is what can earn the most money or provide the most power, but there are also specializations. Take swing dancing as a further example. If an individual has swing dancing in their sphere, then that has a particular value in a particular community. In that community they are a “good dancer” and superior to others, but it might not necessarily translate outside that community.

Or think again of the parent of the pesky child who relentlessly asks the question: “Why?” This parent probably does know more and does occupy a larger sphere than the child. Here is another diagram, which we could say represents that parent, with the earlier diagram representing the child:

Diagram representing a slightly larger sphere of the known, still surrounded by the infinite unknown.

Regardless of how large the sphere of an individual is, outside that sphere the unknowns are still infinite. For Martin A. Schwartz, a professor of medicine and biomedical engineering, this is a crucial lesson: the scope of things unknown isn’t merely vast; it is, for all practical purposes, infinite (Schwartz 2008). In relation to the unknown outside the finitude of the sphere, there is an equality in how little everyone knows together in the bigger scheme of things. A turn toward ignorance, then, which lies in every direction if only the individual would open their eyes and take notice, is an emancipatory one. It collapses both those hierarchies and what informed them in the first place. An individual might know how to save lives, but does he know how to Charleston? Another individual might know how to trade on the stock market, but does she know how to submit a practice-based research paper to a peer-reviewed journal? What is the validity of this knowledge in the first place? How do we all know what we know, how do we know it is true, and what is its value? Schwartz argues that focusing on questions to which you don’t know the answer puts you in the awkward situation of appearing ignorant, and that “productive stupidity” means making a choice to be ignorant, i.e. choosing to turn toward the unknown and ask the question. He recognizes that no doubt reasonable levels of confidence and emotional resilience help to ease this transition from learning what other people once discovered
to making your own discoveries. The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the
deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries
(Schwartz 2008). It is my suggestion that Ignoramus Anonymous creates this convivial resilience,
potentially leading toward transformative discoveries.

Over the course of an Ignoramus Anonymous meeting, spheres of the known fluctuate in size, as
beyond the generally convivial banter that forms the first layer of the work a sincere self-
reflexivity is prompted both during and after the fact (Jaspers 2014). Jaspers notes that “the
realisation of some things that we don’t know, or half know, or thought we knew—and how
these implicitly reflect certain attitudes and biases—can be acutely unsettling as well as genuinely
transformative” (Jaspers 2014). This transformative turning toward taking note of our ignorance
means that our spheres of knowledge also grow, as unknown unknowns become known
unknowns. Known knowns also fluctuate into known unknowns through personal reflection and
questioning ourselves and each other of what we truly understand, without a superior
authoritative source such as a teacher or textbook (or Google).

**Conclusion**

New knowledge comes about by pushing at the unknown (or at least accidently dipping your toe
in it), and that is always going to be unsettling (or surprising) on some level. On the surface of
each of the spheres that we occupy is where the known meets the unknown, where knowledge
forms and pedagogy happens. Turning toward what is outside the sphere and relating it to what
is inside—this is the form of pedagogy that Rancière wrote about Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant
Schoolmaster* and what is explored in *Ignoramus Anonymous*. Both are forms of pedagogy that come
not from looking toward what is already known by others, but from what is unknown in oneself
and from what is happening on the surface of our spheres. Both provide a context rather than
content. Turning toward ignorance through *Ignoramus Anonymous* will help these spheres grow,
but it will also humble the cultural value of what is inside the sphere and birth the possibility of a
democratic community forming through the impossibility of knowing everything outside of each
individual’s sphere.

Making this turn through the performance of a support group for ignorance means operating at
the dual horizon Bishop observes necessary, of facing toward art and the social field, “testing
and revising the criteria we give to both domains in a double finality that avoids the work
becoming ‘edu-tainment’ or ‘pedagogical aesthetics’” (Bishop 2012, 274). It is a case of art
involving the social process of most effective education, as Barthes suggests of the teaching
relation, not of teacher to taught but of those taught to each other (Bishop 2012, 274). *Ignoramus
Anonymous* brings these relations into play through the considered choreography of a simple
conversation that crystallizes a sense of emancipation.

In a conversation I had with Jaspers at the conclusion of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting she
attended at the State Library of New South Wales in 2014, I referred to the social form of the
support group as the “conceit” of my project. I meant that it was my artistic device for
facilitating what I have described here as an ignorant turn. Jaspers disputed the word, though,
feeling that it tended toward metaphorical allusions of the function of the work and away from
the genuine support group that the performance was. Here I have shown how *Ignoramus
Anonymous* might act as a metaphoric conceit for further exploring Rancière’s theories of
intellectual emancipation and be akin to a genuine pedagogical support group that uses
conversation to elicit a turn toward and a discovery of that which we hardly pay attention: our
ignorance.
Notes

1. Schneider and Wright propose (2006) the term “productive irritants” as a method for describing interdisciplinary conversations between artists and anthropologists. I use it here to describe conversations I had with serial participants of *Ignoramus Anonymous* that I tracked down in early 2016. *Ignoramus Anonymous* was a free walk-up event, and to honour it as a support group I never documented a single meeting. Given this, I have no record of who attended what meetings. This was slightly problematic for the gathering of information to write a paper. It meant I was only able to engage colleagues in feedback and not any strangers who attended from the general public. This limited feedback was generated through email conversations after I distributed an early draft of this paper to colleagues who I recalled attending multiple *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings.

2. A contemporary rendition of the Jacotot narrative can be observed in the 1999 *Hole in the Wall* project in which poor young Indian children figured out how to use a PC on their own, in a foreign language, and then taught other children. This is recounted by educational researcher Sugata Mitra in his 2007 Ted Talk *Kids Can Teach Themselves*. For more on the project see Mitra (2007).

3. *The Emancipated Spectator* was originally presented, in English, at the opening of the Fifth International Summer Academy of the Arts in Frankfurt in 2004. That text appeared in *Artforum* in 2007 and was then slightly revised and re-published in 2009. I will refer to both these versions.

4. It feels important to note that a large part of this research took place through looking back in 2016 at the accumulation of experiences associated with the project. Analysis is ongoing as *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings continue to be held sporadically.

5. Both the State Library of New South Wales and Waverley Library, where *Ignoramus Anonymous* went on to be held as monthly meetings, had a regular fixture of public programs into which the project fit.

6. This is part of what Rancière terms the “aesthetic regime” of art, which is “constantly caught in a tension between being specifically art and merging with other forms of activity and being” (Berrebi 2008, 2). For more on Rancière’s regimes of identification of art see Berrebi (2008).

7. I would contend that this analogy is slightly off the mark. “Googling” is about filling in gaps in knowledge and understanding, whereas *Ignoramus Anonymous* is about recognizing, accepting, and sitting with your ignorance, in discussion with others. It is not a place for teaching; it is a space for support. It is a space for wondering rather than answering. After each question is raised at the meeting a conversation unfolds on that subject until the next question is raised.

8. This idea of learning through conversation is not new. It can be seen represented in the extensive writings of Plato’s *Dialogues*, where several characters often dispute a subject by questioning each other. Writing in this way allowed a multiplicity of perspectives to be rendered and enabled the reader to draw their own conclusions as to the most valid (Hare 2010). However, the reader was not taking part in the dialogue. The question being asked in this paper is: What would happen if the live audience were to participate in such a dialogue? For examples of the Plato dialogues see Hare (2010).

9. *Ignoramus Anonymous* attendee Anneke Jaspers recalls discussing questions including “the crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations, the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, the meaning of neoliberalism” and discussing each “with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration and guilt” (Jaspers 2014). Another participant, Jennifer Medway, recalls that when asked, no one in the group knew beyond the first verse of the national anthem and that in so doing a collective ignorance was revealed (Medway 2016). A recurring question I would ask the group was why they believed the Earth was round and revolved around the sun, instead of a flat disc supported on the back of a giant turtle.

10. This is rhetoric adopted from former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a US Department of Defense News Briefing in 2002 (Rumsfeld 2002). In the now infamous briefing, Rumsfeld acknowledged that the unknown unknowns were the most difficult category.

11. Smithson prefers the terms “conscious ignorance” and “meta-ignorance” (Smithson 2008, 210), which further suggests that known unknowns are preferable to unknown unknowns because the awareness of an individual of their ignorance means that at least there is a limit to that particular ignorance.
12. More on these projects can be read and viewed online in Meagher (2011).

13. Medway wrote to me of one meeting in particular: “There was a guy there who was for all intents and purposes a bigoted man, but who may also have been coping with a mental illness. . . . What started as a tirade against Muslims became accounts of having seen angels and been told information by voices no one else could hear. This was combined with a woman who . . . was there for an argument, there to be open with her opinions and thoughts and who challenged this man quite readily. It was clear that neither of them had come to a performance . . . they were all there and committed as attendees of a support group for ignorance. This conversation went on without mediation from you. At no point did you become an authority and break the understanding of us all being on the same level. In fact, it only ended when the man left (a very relieving moment for us all)” (Medway 2016).

14. Both Rogers and Medway used the analogy of the levelling of a playing field.

15. *Ignoramus Anonymous* was eventually presented in the form of monthly meetings at the State Library NSW and Waverley Council Library (Sydney), and then at the Performance Space “Sonic Social” program at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), as part of the Festival of Live Art at Arts House (Melbourne), at Launceston Library as part of the Junction Arts Festival (Launceston), at The Wheeler Centre (Melbourne) and at the Bondi Pavilion Gallery (Sydney). In this paper, I focus just on the library presentations of the project, which the project was originally made for and most conducive within. The important tension between art and non-art is retainable within a library because, as mentioned in Berrebi (2008), “art has not been attributed a specific place” in such a context.

16. Grimley wrote: “I liked using them [the meetings] as places to bring dates. I wanted to learn about how my dates thought. Which ideas and people attracted them in the group, and what they might offer as their own ignorance. I wanted to see if they liked to think in interesting patterns. I liked showing off my ignorance too” (Grimley 2016).

17. Grimley noted of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, the appearance of the “subjective nature of all experience” and that the transfer of knowledge always requires a great deal of faith in others (Grimley 2016).

18. On this durational character, Woodhouse recalls “when leaving the room, the conversation went on in my head as I thought of many other things that I was ignorant of or could have brought up, that weren’t triggered at the time” (Woodhouse 2016).

References


I would like to begin with a series of questions:

Has something that you did not know ever caused you trouble or embarrassment? Is there something that you don’t understand nagging away at your conscience? Is there something seemingly nonsensical that continues to puzzle you? This could be anything from a matter in the news and current affairs, to an existential quandary, to a recently completed book, or even ideas circulating this very conference.

In hubris shattering moments we recognise that there is a wealth of ignorance outside of our specialisations, outside of what we know and understand. We hide from this ignorance on a daily basis, even with gracious acceptance. In our specialisations there is a hierarchy in how our knowledge and understanding compares to others, and how this information is valued. Meanwhile, what everyone doesn’t know and doesn’t understand is for all practical purposes infinite.

What happens then in a collective confrontation with the inevitable lack of understanding and knowledge that we have? What would be the byproduct of the humbling experience of looking outside our bubbles of what we know and into the unknown?

This became a driving question for me through my performance project Ignoramus Anonymous.

Ignoramus Anonymous takes the form of a support group meeting for the ignorant - i.e. anyone and everyone. It is a participatory performance project that was originally devised for presentation within a library space. Those present sit in a traditional support group circle and revel together in what they do not know and what they do not know that they do not know. It is a space to ask questions and receive support, without necessarily looking for answers to those questions. It is a supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be confessed, as we share our limitations of knowledge.
and understanding with each other. Within the circle our ignorance presents the possibility to confront a democratic equality with one another. Our support proposes a form of intellectual emancipation, and through exposing how little we all know: an equality of intelligence in all.

In a recent paper, published in the journal Performance Matters, I argued that such an ignorant turn in contemporary art, away from transmitting information and away from explication, birthed the possibility of a form of intellectual emancipation. Intellectual emancipation like that which Jacques Rancière chronicled of French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot, who in the early 19th Century discovered he was able to teach what he himself did not know: the Flemish language. I argued so based on observations and experiences that Ignoramus Anonymous has generated, particularly the playing with of the social form of the support group as a context I provide as the artist behind the work, and the instigating of that situation within a library context, where ‘art’ was simultaneously able to be ‘not-art’.

After writing that paper, An Artist’s Ignorant Turn, I realised I was arguing that what constituted the work of art was the work that the art did, the possibility of intellectual emancipation through the experience of the context I implemented. The work of art was a verb rather than a noun.

What I skirted in the paper was the presentation of the project outside the library contexts. Library presentations took the form of monthly meetings at the State Library of NSW and Waverley Council Library, across 2013 and 2014. In this time I also presented the project at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The focus of this paper is the shift between the library and art world contexts for the project, and reconciling the different work done by the project in different environments. I will include voices from some of the participants, curators and stakeholders in the MCA iteration of the project.

I began thinking through this new line of enquiry earlier this year when my partner Laura and I were holidaying in the United States.
Upon taking in the great many historically famous works at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Laura, a primary-school teacher-librarian, suggested that the works exhibited would be much more effective on our wall at home rather than housed in the gallery context where we viewed them.

As we continued to stroll the museum we discussed her assertion. To contextualise her position, Laura made an analogy regarding teeth. Teeth belong in the mouth, she said. That is where they do their job. If you take teeth out of the mouth they are no longer able to do their job. They are no longer able to fulfill their function and purpose. Laura likened the art within the museum to be like teeth removed from the mouth, if teeth were purchased from the mouth rather than excavated to avoid infectious cavities spreading. The majority of the art we were viewing served an original function and
purpose somewhere else, in some other time. The job might have been to decorate a palace, or to perpetuate the power of a monarchy or religion. For Laura, in the museum, the original job of these artworks could no longer be done. For her it was not just about a removal from the context that birthed the work and its function, because of course that context probably no longer existed. It was that there were simply so many of these impressive works in the one building that they were all lost in one another. So many teeth had been removed from so many mouths and were on show together that it was difficult for her untrained eye to discern between them. It was hard for all this work to do its work, whether that be what was originally intended or otherwise. To Laura this felt like a mighty shame. Whilst our home in Sydney might not be the intended context for her preferred paintings, Laura contended that at least it was still a domestic space rather than a state-run institution and that would be more apt for her favorite pieces, selfishly depriving the works of a greater audience in the speculative restoration of them to the "real world".

Why would, say, George Romney’s *Portrait of Emma Hart* be considered more a part of the “real world” if it were on the wall of our home? The implication here is that the museum or gallery does not constitute the real world, that these institutions are somehow separate from it.

Laura’s position was far from being the naïve sentiments of someone who confesses to "not know art, but to know what she likes". Laura’s thoughts resonated with the reconciliation I was presently trying to make regarding my own art practice and research. Laura had unconsciously drawn attention to American philosopher John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1934), which contains a call that has been interpreted by a range of scholars for the work of art to be
thought of as a verb rather than a noun. As a verb, for Dewey the work of art is the work that art does to enhance an everyday lived experience of life, outside the compartmentalization of the gallery context. Such a context for Dewey is where “art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement” (1934, p. 2), what Laura and I had referred to as the “real world”.

As Dewey puts it “the actual work of art is what the product does with and in experience” (1934, p. 1). Laura wanted the works to do something as part of life in the real world, as in fact many of these works originally did before being bought up by the modern conception of the gallery as, amongst other things, “memorials to the rise of nationalism and imperialism” (Dewey 1934, p. 7). As works of art lose their indigenous status, they acquired a new one, what Dewey calls “that of being specimens of fine art and nothing else” (Dewey 1934, p. 8). Laura wanted there to be something else. She wanted an experience with these works and of these works, and felt this was prevented in the gallery space. In this space works like the Portrait of Emma Hart, her favorite, were “isolated from the human conditions under which it was brought into being and from the human consequences it engenders in actual life-experience” (Dewey 1934, p. 1). It is in this way that she was contending that the gallery was separate from the real world, whilst we wandered the vast exhibition spaces of the Philadelphia Museum. It is a contention I have harbored myself in my art making and research.

An 1805 cast of the ancient Greek sculpture Laocón, on display at the Philadelphia Museum.

Of course, strictly speaking, such spaces are a part of the real world. This is an acceptance that has been reached only over the last couple of hundred years. It would never have occurred to the Ancient Greeks, for example,
to make a division between the collective life that was manifested in war, worship and the forum, and the arts that brought color, grace and dignity into these places and operations (Dewey 1934, pp. 5 – 6). For their contested idea that art was an act of reproduction or imitation “did not signify that art was a literal copying of objects, but that it reflected the emotions and ideas that are associated with the chief institutions of social life” (Dewey 1934, p. 6). Nowadays we have Ancient Greek sculptures exhibited in state-run museums, like in Philadelphia, and plays of the period performed in theatres around the world. The institutions that these works are shown in action as a frame that acknowledges the separation occupied for the viewer.

There is an in-depth analysis of the metaphor of “framing” in the 1994 publication *Framing and Interpretation* (MacLachlan & Reid 1994). It discusses how “certain situations of spaces institutionalized by society can be seen as constituting semiotic fields within which events and relationships signify differently” (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p. 45). This can be seen in the way that the larger context of a theatre, museum or art gallery, for example, acts as an initial frame that changes the interpretation of the content therein (MacLachlan & Reid 1994, p. 45). It is a metacommunicative message that helps answer the question that sociologist Erving Goffman believes we ask ourselves when attending any situation: “What is it that is going on here?” (p. 46). The frame allows an individual to reach the answer: “Oh...it’s art!”
Laura and I discussed this idea while she decided upon a list of her favorite works of the collection on show at the Philadelphia Museum. In lieu of our conversation though, questions were raised for me as my thoughts turned towards *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

As a participatory performance, originally made for and presented within a library context, there was nothing to frame the project as art at all, even in the collateral for the event. Monthly meetings of the project had been held at the State Library of NSW and Waverley Council Library for approximately 18 months.

Then in 2014 I was approached to hold meetings at the MCA in Sydney as part of a program of work called ‘Sonic Social’, curated by Performance Space. I felt the presentation was a success, but something remained to get to the bottom of in the transitioning of the project from the community context of the library to the art world context of the MCA.
When attending the situation of *Ignoramus Anonymous* and an individual asks themselves Goffman’s question of “What is it that is going on here?” the unconscious query is quickly answered through my playful adoption of the social form of the support group. Seats are taken in a circle of chairs and I casually announce: “This is *Ignoramus Anonymous*, a support group for ignorance”. Through leading an introductory act of guided meditation I explain that this is a space to ask questions and receive support, without looking for answers for those questions, which ranged from the everyday to the increasingly complex. Curator and writer Anneke Jaspers recalled discussing in an open forum a range of topics which participants felt ill informed regarding, with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration or guilt. The crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations, the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, the meaning of neoliberalism.

After thinking about John Dewey at the Philadelphia Museum, I reflected on the framing of *Ignoramus Anonymous* to ask a more probing question of my own regarding the situation I constructed. Not what is going on here, but rather: “What work is being done here?” How exactly is that work being done? Is that work different in the different contexts that *Ignoramus Anonymous* is presented in?

I conversed with staff involved with the ‘Sonic Social’ program, who had attended meetings at the library as well, on the difference and similarities between these two incarnations of the project.
Kelly McDonald, Assistant Curator at the MCA, thought that the MCA was as fitting as the Waverley Council Library. This is because “both are bastions of knowledge and both are education spaces, even though the library might have more of a community context feeling to it” (McDonald 2016). McDonald noted that “somewhere like a park or café or bar would have been a real different context” (McDonald 2016). She recalled that we wanted to situate Ignoramus Anonymous outside of the actual gallery space of the museum and that the Resource Room was eventually decided on.

McDonald experienced similar ignorance being discussed at both Waverley Library and the MCA, which revolved particularly around “questions of understanding humanity”. She felt that a legitimate support group was enacted in both locations “because of the sincerity of my presence and
opening meditation", a reference to my performance craft.

Tulleah Pearce, Associate Curator at Performance Space, concurred with McDonald’s feeling that similar ignorance was brought up at the MCA with the meeting she attended in advance at the State Library NSW. Pearce noted a difference though in the machinations of the meeting itself. For her, there was a “feeling of needing to make the project more “worthwhile” in a gallery context...whereas in the library the discussion was more attuned to the everyday, which facilitated an easier flow in the performance”. She suggested that at the MCA I had to “bring more” in my role, because the conversation was less robust than at the library, and at the MCA there was a noticeable increase of my labour and those participating, or at least the labour was more transparent”. Her experience was that “the library had a more community meeting feel”. Having said this, Pearce was of the opinion that the project

...did the same work at both gallery and library, but perhaps not as quickly at the MCA, because of an anticipation of the work and a perceived order and control of how it would unfold...(Pearce 2016).

What I believe Pearce meant by this was that the frame of art brings about certain behaviors when it is placed over a situation. The frame was opaque in the library, but heavily transparent at the MCA. This meant that people responded to the situation in terms of how a participatory performance might operate, rather than how a support group might operate. Pearce felt a sense of genuine participation with Ignoramus Anonymous, “as opposed to filling in a blank in the artwork”. That blank being the artist’s gesture to the death of themselves as the author and the openness of their work, after Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco. Pearce ultimately felt that “the project restores the wonderment and pondering that is lacking in the everyday”.

She went on to make a rather obvious observation that I had not considered, that Ignoramus Anonymous could also never be done at just any room in any library (because there is a degree of privacy and intimacy required, and being able to conduct a conversation). There are library-to-library differences as there are library-to-gallery differences. This led her to the rather salient point that the project was perhaps not actually that different between contexts “because people are the context”. The people shift meeting to meeting. For Pearce, "the transition from library to MCA is perhaps not as significant as the transition of the people and date of the meeting". Her comments made me realise that actually, I am the only constant and there are different people with different expectations present at every meeting.

On the sentiment of the wonder that might be restored by the project, artist and ‘Digital Learning Producer’ for the MCA, Alex White, spoke of the
“timeliness” of *Ignoramus Anonymous*. For White it was timely considering the place of knowledge today, where it can be crowd sourced and take the form of instructional YouTube videos and Wikipedia entries. You can look up four different recipes online and blend them on the fly based on what is in the pantry, or what you might reckon might be best. (White 2016)

White was of the belief that “seeking this information is less conscious. It happens in a turn to the phone, without realising it”. He considers that the “distinction between knowledge and understanding as always having been the same, but we can fact check quicker now”. What this leads to is less wonderment and pondering, as Pearce alluded to. White wondered what *Ignoramus Anonymous* might have been like if it had been held 10-20 years ago? How would it be different? How would it be the same? He also wondered what the contribution of capitalism was towards our ignorance, noting that what we need to know in the wake of capitalism has shifted as knowledge has been distributed and “farmed out”.

I could only speculate on *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings throughout the preceding decades, but doing so leads to an interesting point. These thoughts from Pearce and White allude to the time and the people as the environment that *Ignoramus Anonymous* is ultimately located within, as opposed to library or gallery. What the support group meeting proposes then is an interaction with that environment, the doing and undergoing of which for Dewey “makes an experience to be an experience” (Dewey 1934, p. 50). *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an experience is the result of the interaction between individuals and their environment which, when carried out, is a “transformation of interaction into participation and communication”
(Dewey 1934, p. 22). This is the work that the art is doing. In a post capitalist environment, knowledge increasingly represents a commodity rather than wisdom. It is also increasingly outsourced to the increasingly accessible Internet. *Ignoramus Anonymous* works to interact with this environment. The project does so through the location of the meetings at both galleries and libraries, momentarily cutting off access to the Internet for the duration of an hour-long meeting in order to sit with our ignorance. The libraries were the original location for the project because they offered an ironic non-art location in which *Ignoramus Anonymous* would be more fitting and a legitimate support group, without being veiled with the institutional frame as “art”. For Pearce that veil subtly revealed the labour of the meetings as a performance, as well as created the assumption of the perceived “boundaries” of a participatory performance work that are not in fact in place.

This feedback suggests that the work could still be done in the gallery setting. The gallery was another mouth for the teeth of the project, in terms of Laura’s analogy in Philadelphia. Or in fact, the people present are both the mouth and teeth of the project, in terms of Pearce’s feedback.

The feedback is obviously skewed by being voiced from the host institution and curator, rather than individuals from the general public who attended. The blind spot of the feedback is open to similar criticism that writers like Claire Bishop have put to the utopic revelries Nicolas Bourriaud claimed of relational aesthetics, for humanising the art world through interactions between people within the gallery space. They are always going to be very different people from very different demographics that attend an event at a major art gallery than to a local council library, creating a different context with or without the artistic veil of the project. What do we make of this? In the wake of the wide range of movements since Dewey called for art to be thought of as the creation of an experience that intensifies a sense of immediate living, there is still a reconciliation to be made of understanding this experience inside and outside of the art world. *Ignoramus Anonymous* as experience through the artistic veil at the MCA is one of representation and utopic dreaming, a creative think space and story-telling machine. It was without the level of risk of the real world, because it was “just a performance”. A performance striving to be something else, and possibly achieving that goal, but a performance first and foremost. This was telling when ignorance discussed in conversations afterwards was commonly referred to as “content” of the work, rather than the work. The work the project was doing was still valid and up for debate. It could still be observed to be enacting support for latent ignorance through instigating conversations between strangers, as a by-product of the death of the author and *Ignoramus Anonymous* as an open work. But outside of the gallery it is not even framed as being a work, it is simply doing work, within actual life experience rather than a representation of it. It is all verb and little
noun. My feeling is that this is interesting new terrain to take the debates of critics like Bishop, Miwon Kwon and others regarding participatory art. There are interesting new ethical dilemmas regarding playing with the social form of the support group as simultaneously art and not-art, especially in a non-art space like the library. It is more slippery and troubling work. To actively sit with a gap in knowledge and understanding without immediately trying to fill it with a deposit of information by teacher, textbook, or Internet, leads towards asking oneself the question: “How do I know things?” The follow up questions to this for my ongoing research to continue to explore will be: “What work does asking this question do?” And: “In what ways does the use of a chosen site act as an interpretive framework that comments on and is commented on by its environment?” (Paterson 2015, p. 101)
Before I begin any further, I would like to take a moment to personally acknowledge that my presentation is taking place on the ancestral lands of the Dharawal peoples and to pay my respects to Elders, past and present. The text written in this Microsoft Word document that I am reading from for this presentation was scribed over the last two weeks while I was on this land, and on trains in and out of it, as well as on the land of the Wurundjeri and Kaurna peoples, and on planes onto and off of these lands. Most of the words were written on Gadigal land, on the east coast of what has come to be known as New South Wales, in the inner west of the city of Sydney.

It was my forefathers who came to these lands and saw them to be without the flags and fences that they understood to demarcate territory, and so they proclaimed terra nullius and colonised the place with flags and fences of their own. Calling it Sydney. Calling it Melbourne. Calling it Adelaide. Calling it Wollongong, using the indigenous language of the area. Calling it Australia.

Through a breadth of violent acts, that perpetuate today, these forefathers raised their flags and established this country. The blood from this violence remains on the hands of their descendants, of people like me, who continue to live under those flags, whether they like it or not, whether they acknowledge it or not.

I got to thinking about this idea of flags in relation to my research, in relation to research more broadly, and in relation to the academic world I have encountered throughout the journey of the PhD project I commenced in 2013 (and have the best of intentions of finishing by the end of next year).

Since commencing my candidature, Israel and Palestine has remained contested territory, Britain voted to leave the EU, Indigenous Australians have continued to fight for a treaty for their self-determination, and there have been an increasing series of terrorist attacks that are too upsetting for words.

Meanwhile I have been reconciling territory of my own, trying to articulate a humble flag of my own to raise within it. It is an incredibly different flag, but a
flag all the same. A flag that represents the new knowledge I am contributing to an existing academic ecology. It is an ongoing process of staking claim to an area of the map of that ecology, a yet to be discovered area that I must find and plant my flag within.

When I made my initial turn towards postgraduate research, I will admit that a significant factor was the lure of the Australian Postgraduate Award. I had been practicing as an artist since completing my undergraduate degree in theatre seven years earlier, living grant-to-grant and project-to-project. I had started identifying as an “interdisciplinary artist”, but as I soldiered on I became increasingly unsure of what these disciplines were that I was operating at the nexus of. In the wake of the uncertainty of this territory, and what felt like lacking any discipline at all, I have recently started giving the term “a-disciplinary artist” a trial in my biography. The idea of the wage that the Australian Postgraduate Award would provide, however measly and below award it may be, was a novel one and would provide some much-desired stability in the life of such a precarious practice like that which I was engaged in. As for the research itself, I wanted to get to the bottom of the many and varied projects I was working on and producing. Works were taking the form of theatre and gallery situations, site-specific and public interventions, performance lectures, film shoots, phone calls, teeth brushing services, walks in the park, letters in the mail and the borrowing of books from the library.

What held all these projects together? What were they all about, and what were they all really about?

The hunch that I commenced my research with was that of the idea of play being what brought these disparate endeavors together. Without being entirely sure what I meant by this, I begun to weave my flag.

Initial weaving was done through reading the existing cannon on the subject of play. Invariably, every text made mention of the difficulties of defining the term. Psychologist and philosopher Jean Piaget noted in 1962 “the many theories of play expounded in the past are clear proof that the phenomenon is difficult to understand” (Piaget 1962, p. 147). Anthropologist Stephen Miller suggested that the difficulty of definition “lies in the fact that we are trying to discuss something of which everyone has a good intuitive grasp but little or nothing in the way of concepts that lend themselves to articulation” (Miller 1973, p. 87).

The articulation I became most fond of was that espoused in 1972 by anthropologist and social scientist Gregory Bateson. Bateson thought of play as a frame, in the sense that it is a metacommunicative message that “this is play” and this frame separates the activity from the more serious business of
real life. It is a tool to open up dialogues and understandings between living beings (Bateson 1972). I began to think of the experience of my projects as unfolding through a play frame, which was often placed over the seemingly non-art situation of a social form or ritual. Such practices have an obvious historical lineage with the likes of Marcel Duchamp and Alan Kapprow, but also share much in common with my colleagues in Australia, colleagues like Lara Thoms, Amy Spiers, Sarah Rodigari, Matt Prest and the pvi collective, to namedrop a handful of those who have become my contemporaries.

My particular use of the play frame created a certain awkwardness, because the play frame might not be clear to the audience or viewer of the work, such as in the support groups for ignorance I ran in the form of monthly meetings at libraries in Sydney across 2013 and 2014. Performance theorist Richard Schechner contends that in such situations when the frame might be concealed, what happens is “dark play” (Schechner 1993). In ‘dark play’ the frame remains hidden and the play activity is undertaken unconsciously by the players (Schechner 1993a, pp. 36 – 39). Bateson’s communicative frame that ‘this is play’ (Bateson 1972a) is not evident in ‘dark play’. In dark play the players might not know that they are playing, but they are playing nonetheless.

Whilst I was not developing my projects based on formal theoretical frameworks such as these concepts of Bateson, Schechner and others, they certainly offered scope for reflection and analysis of the methodologies in my art practice.

I found myself commencing writing my dissertation in variations of the same basic grammatical structure of much of the art writing around me. “According to Bateson…x”. Or “As Schechner says…y”, or “For philosopher Jacques Ranciere…z” The writer recites the creed of who they are reading, applies it to their interests and displays the wonderful knack for being able to chase down sources, follow links on Google, and read what they find.

I note the irony of what I am about to say, but for critic Grant Kester what this has the effect of is reducing insights into the contingency of transcendent knowledge and promoting a model in which the primary importance is the ability to explicate theoretical texts, for the writer to plant their flag within these texts in the process. In addition, as a creative practitioner this was a most uncreative formula and simply emulated and perpetuated a terse understanding of the academic world around me (and my writing erred on the side of manifesto rather than the academic).

When trying to reconcile the difficulty I was having, I came across Kester’s article “The Device Laid Bare”, in which he highlights these limitations of art
criticism, writing and research. He quotes fellow critic Rosalind Krauss and her call to arms for the critical text to be wrought into a paraliterary form, dedicated not to revealing layers of meaning but to opening up the play of interpretation. For Krauss, and this is Kester now committing the same heinous linguistic crime: “the key move, necessary to restore some theoretical gravitas...was to transpose the paraliterary as a form of hermeneutic [definition: concerning interpretation] undoing associated with writing onto the work...which would constitute a kind of physical embodiment of the text...laying bare the apparatus, making strange, and generally confounding closure, stasis, and fixity in all their many guises.” Krauss traces inspiration for her position to Russian literary critic Viktor Shklovsky, for whom writing was a form of counter hegemonic de-naturalization, and language not simply a neutral medium for the transmission of an a priori truth about the world but something that produces its own new meaning.

It was into this way of thinking that my project Ignoramus Anonymous emerged, not as the focus of my research but the focus through which my research was undertaken and my dissertation written. 

Ignoramus Anonymous takes the form of a support group for ignorance. It involves coming together for an hour-long meeting to share and revel with strangers in what you do not know, and what you do not know that you do not know. It is a space to ask questions and receive support, without necessarily looking for answers to those questions. Curator and writer Anneke Jaspers recalled discussing in an open forum at the meeting she attended at the State Library NSW a range of topics which participants felt ill informed regarding, with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration or guilt. Questions regarding the crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations and acknowledging and welcoming to country and the correct protocols for these practices, questions around the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, and the meaning of neoliberalism.

Through these discussions, each meeting provides collective support for the ignorance that is latent in every individual, from the everyday to the increasingly complex. Nothing new is necessarily learnt at Ignoramus Anonymous, but the support offered is a form of pedagogy in itself. The meetings are a space to ask questions and receive this support. It is a supportive space where not knowing and not understanding can be confessed, as we share our limitations of knowledge and understanding. Through the simple circle of the support group, in which our ignorance suggests the confrontation of a democratic equality with one another, our support proposes an intellectual emancipation and an equality of intelligence in all.
I thought of the process of adopting and adapting the social form of a support group as play in the same sense that neurologist Sigmund Freud observed the playing child behaving like a creative writer, in that things of his world are rearranged in a new way which pleases him. It is the case of an artistic ‘playing with reality’, toying with social situations, rules, concepts and narratives. In this light I considered my practice in common with the playing child, because in play the child links “his imagined objects and situations to the tangible and visible things of the real world” (Freud, p. 144), and this is precisely what I was doing through my practice of re-framing social forms and situating them back in the world, both inside and outside of art world contexts.

*Ignoramus Anonymous* was presented in a number of libraries across a number of years, without any frame of art, as well as within art institutions and festivals within such a frame. It was also now to feature in the new context of academic research. Consideration of my initial research into play frames placed around social forms exposed a slipperiness of projects that displayed an art and not-art simultaneousness, which Ranciere discusses in relation to what he calls the aesthetic regime of art. It made the most sense for my research to be conducted through the rubric of social practice, territory in which flags have continually been planted and re-planted through literature by the likes of Nicholas Bourriaud, Claire Bishop, Miwon Kwon and Grant Kester. If I were to raise a flag through my research then it might be within this territory, I thought.

I continue to wonder what the flag itself might be. It might be play. It might be ignorance. It might simply be a question mark, at half-mast, flapping in a wind that continually changes direction. It would be at half-mast not as a gesture of respect for death but as a gesture of commitment to uncertainty. Would this flag be half way up or half way down?

As simultaneously an art project, a support group and a research project from which this flag would be flown, *Ignoramus Anonymous* continues to be very much alive, and meetings are ongoing. Meetings call upon child-like behavior, from both myself and participants, of playing and asking “Why?” to everything. Asking why to the point of devolving and exposing a confrontation with the inevitable lack of understanding everyone has to everything around them. Exposing uncertainty. It is an ongoing intellectual adventure in ignorance, in which theory continues to be encountered and researched through the project. I will place this theory into conversation with experiences and observations of the support group meetings from participants and myself. It is a gonzo-like research process, of mapping a continually fluctuating terrain of flags, wherein knowns and unknowns have been forever shifting and recalcitrant to certainty. It is the employment of what cultural studies researcher Eve Sedgwick calls “weak theory”, which is in contrast to “strong
theory” that defends itself against the puncturing of its dream of a perfect parallelism between the analytic subject (the concept) and the world – a kind of razed earth for academic conversation” (Stewart, p. 72). My thinking is that the weak theory researching through Ignoramus Anonymous bridges such razing of the earth for academic conversation. It decolonizes. It does so through the play frame that opens up dialogues and understandings.

In closing, let me make two final deferrals back to that typical academic formula, in which I say, For Sedgwick, and for her colleague in cultural studies Kathleen Stewart: “There are countless moments in which something throws itself together – moments that require a kind of weak theory, or a space in which attending to such things is made habitual...the point of theory...is not to judge the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation “right” but to wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating and attending to things are already somehow present in them as a potential or resonance.”

As art project, non-art project and research project, it is my contention that Ignoramus Anonymous proposes such a moment.
INTERVIEWS
Interview with Dr. Mim Fox, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, School of Health and Society at The University of Wollongong.

30 May, 2017.

**MW:** You’ve just said that you’re not sure how useful you’re going to be, but what I was going to say is that I think that you’ve been useful already. After you asked me to have this project feature in your syllabus, it was almost like validation for me because I’ve been making these claims about how I enact genuine support and it’s a genuine support group and I’ve been getting some funny looks when I make that claim. But now I’m able to say: “Well, there’s a Dr. Mim that’s actually included the project on her social work syllabus. So take that”.

**MF:** Oh, interesting. Ok. So. What you are interested in discussing is how what you’re doing fits into the realm of a support group?

**MW:** Yes. This idea of being “genuine” and what might make a support group “genuine”. If I have these sincere intentions, and yet the project has something of an ironic guise to it and it’s called *Ignoramus Anonymous* and a support group for ignorance, and to some people that might sound like a silly thing…

**MF:** What do you see as the eventual goal of your support group? What do you hope for people for when they come along?

**MW:** Um. I guess a sort of liberation, of being able to say: “I don’t know”.

**MF:** So, is your goal a process that happens in the support group itself, or is your goal something bigger than that, which happens once they leave? Like, are you actually trying to enact a level of change?

**MW:** Well, I guess the way I’ve thought about it, and this would be where you’d be able to tell me if I’m right or wrong, is that through enacting a support group, is it actually about change or is it about the process of a space to speak through something that is ongoing for each individual?

**MF:** Well, it could be either, but I don’t know whether that is the reason why it would be a support group or not. I think the process that happens allows it to be a support group regardless. So. If you actually have people talking about their world views, but not just their worldviews, their humanity within
those worldviews, if you have people actually sharing their life experience in some way, and you have other people not just bearing witness to that, but engaging in that in some way, then I would say, that support allows it to be a support group. The question about change comes about because I’m a social worker, and social workers are all about change. But, I think that there is actually something bigger that happens in your group because the experience of being in that group and being able to engage in a safe space to explore what is quite a vulnerable life experience, the “not-knowing”, that is a space that can really have a lot of vulnerability attached to it and risk-taking attached to it, by being able to do that in a safe space, that actually is setting up a dynamic or a way of functioning that then can be translated into people’s everyday life. So, I do think actually there’s a greater purpose to these groups. Even if you don’t start with that intention. I do think there’s an outcome.

MW: Yeah. So. What is the actual change then? I feel like maybe there is one, but I couldn’t really say what it is exactly…

MF: Well. What makes the difference between this being a performance art PhD, as opposed to a social work PhD, is that if it was a social work PhD I would wanting to interview people who came to the group and I would be wanting to do some sort of longitudinal process. I would want to follow up in six months time, or a year’s time, and say, “How is your life? What is different in your world and what can you see as the benefits of having gone to that group?” Do you know what I mean? But that’s the difference between our disciplines.

MW: Well. Over the last twenty years or so there has been a significant increase in art projects, like what I’m doing, and there’s a sort of schism between this sort of posturing and do-gooding, which would involve making claims about changes I am bringing about, versus the idea that the efficacy of assessing those outcomes is not possible and so why are trying to make such claims?

MF: Do you know Carl Rogers’ work within encounter groups? Encounter groups were really huge in the seventies and they were all about people coming into a group environment with their life experience, and they’re often traumatic experiences but not always, and facing other people and having an encounter where they were forced to confront whatever it is that was happening in their world and in their life experience through the peer lens. That is really where support groups came from. This idea that if you come together as peers, then actually that process of encountering can actually then provide breakthroughs and provide change. So. What Carl Rogers might have said is that the process is actually what’s really important, and then what will happen for the individual comes parallel to that later on, which is kind of
what you’re saying. There is actually a resistance to making it more than just an experience, which is what you were just saying from the history that you’re coming from, in which it doesn’t need to be more and it can just be what is happening there in the group at that moment.

**MW:** Yes. But then I have gone and had this hunch that maybe it is enacting genuine support, but then have become unsure what that is, and this has led me to something of a quandary.

**MF:** Yes. I wonder whether the reason why you’re unsure is because you haven’t been tested with it. So. Remember when you did the interview with me and I asked you what would happen if someone disclosed something or said something inappropriate and you told me about an experience where you had to ask someone to leave? All of those experiences as a facilitator actually challenge your role and your purpose and what you hope for the greater outcomes of the group. Right? But, I wonder whether when, as you keep going, if you’re challenged more in different areas, whether an area of challenge for you will actually be an interesting component to this thesis. What happens to you?

**MW:** Well. Sometimes meetings have that sense of vulnerability that we discussed, but sometimes it is just quite trivial. Like: “How do traffic lights work? Is there a sensor under there or is it a timer?” That’s not really expressing any vulnerability…

**MF:** …but it may, because you may have a blind person in your group who has had real struggle in their relationship with traffic lights. You might have somebody who’s been in a car accident as a pedestrian who’s had an issue.

**MW:** I just remember when that came up, it did feel like it had no qualms to it. Like, it doesn’t really affect my life. It was just a passing curiosity, you know…

**MF:** But that is the beauty of groups, is that for that group in that moment, it is just a curiosity. It’s a superficial conversation and doesn’t mean terribly much. For another group with different individuals, different participants can take the discussion in a completely different way.

**MW:** Ok. So. Within an encounter group or support group, what is the process of assessing the outcome of how impactful it was to have that discussion about traffic lights or whatever the discussion might have been? What’s the process of assessing the impact and change?

**MF:** So. Groups usually have different forms of assessment and evaluation attached to them. You could evaluate at each group at the end of each group,
you could do a discussion, you could do a survey, you might actually have them as part of the group, or you could do activities as you go along in the groups which are evaluative activities where everybody writes on a piece of paper three things that they’ve really enjoyed or gotten out of the group or whatever, which goes into a hat and gets read. It gets read anonymously around the circle. You could do a time capsule exercise, where everybody writes something at the beginning, they answer a question at the beginning, and then later on they answer the same question and do a comparison. Or, you could do interviews with participants at a later point. The beauty of a group is that there are many different ways that you’ll be able to do that. Right? But if you want to know specifically about one particular thing, you would need to have some sort of targeted evaluation that actually asked about that. Right?

**MW:** Yeah. Well. That sounds reassuring to me, in the sense that I am still trying to reconcile for myself the idea of the genuine support that my projects enacts, because I think this struggle around efficacy and outcomes and the fact that it is always going to be different and always be a difficult thing to do. Maybe I shouldn’t let that plague me too much, because it is always going to be a difficult thing to grapple with no matter what the sort of group.

**MF:** Absolutely. I don’t think I don’t think that the productivity or potential or success of the group hinges on what the outcomes are. But, I do think that this is a struggle here between what happens in the process of the group and what happens around that, and that can only really be challenged through you having these encounters in these situations and been tested as a facilitator.

**MW:** There has been a couple of occasions when a friend has wanted to push me on the frame of the group and question what we are doing here together like this…

**MF:** Which is interesting…

**MW:** But they’re often just being cheeky…

**MF:** But even if they might be being cheeky in posing the question, everybody in responding is not being cheeky. Taking the question at face value and really debating why they are here and what are they hoping to gain from it? That’s a really interesting question. If I was going to be evaluating the group, that’s the sort of discussion I would want on tape because that’s really interesting. The people themselves answering that question for you…

**MW:** Yes. Well. It has come up and people have said that it’s quite liberating to
speak freely, or they use that expression you use of it being a “safe space”, or a “safer space”, as one particular person put it because she felt that there is no such thing as a truly “safe space”, in which it feels that we can say anything.

MF: Interesting. Two things spring to my mind. Firstly is the fear that that person holds around the lack of safety in a group setting generally. There’s a fear there. What might happen if something gets said that makes the space unsafe? Right? That interests me, because you’re not going to get that response from everyone. Then, I always think in any group, you don’t know who is sitting around that circle and what they’ve brought with them. Right? So my automatic assumption is, well, something’s happened to that person in a group environment in the past that makes them automatically feel unsafe.

MW: I think that as the discussion unfolded it became apparent that it wasn’t necessarily based on her own experience but on the experience of other people in other groups.

MF: Well. These are all variables that will shift and change the process of your group and the outcome of them.

MW: So, is there a bare minimum then of what something has to be to be a support group?

MF: I still think it’s about the process that happens, not the outcomes. That’s what makes it a support group. Okay. If somebody says, “I don’t feel safe in this group now”, or demonstrates that they don’t feel safe, what do other people do in response to that?

MW: Yes. Well. Thankfully for me that has come up very rarely, I think.

MF: But that is the sort of thing that I would be thinking about if you’re going to be questioning this in your thesis. I would be thinking that you would spend a little bit of time plotting or journaling around the times that did happen so that you can be really exploring this idea of what is the meaning of a support group, and whether or not this group does actually fulfil that because they’re the moments that you’ll see it, when there’s a challenge. It’s interesting, because in your group people will be coming there for many different reasons, right? Some people might just be bored or lonely or have seen the advertisement. There might be some people coming to meet new people. You might have people coming there because they are genuinely lonely and really needing some sort of social interaction, but without knowing all of that, it’s hard then to know. If it was a traditional support group, you would know all those motivations and you would have spoken with all those people before they came and have an understanding of the shared commonalities so that
you can be pitching your group.

**MW:** I think that I unconsciously decided to not do any of that to make it just about how you have come, because you have seen an ad for a support group for ignorance, and you’re attending because you’re interested in that and I am not so interested in why beyond that.

**MF:** Then, I would question whether it is a support group. Because if you don’t pay any credence to any of those factors that people have come to at all, and if it is only about asking the ignorant questions and having the discussion, if that’s all it’s about, then when something happens, like someone takes over or someone’s offensive, why wouldn’t you just let it play out?

**MW:** Because…It’s not right

**MF:** But why isn’t it right?

**MW:** Well. Because the group becomes fractured.

**MF:** So there is another actual point to this group. It’s not just about asking the questions and having the discussion. It’s also about doing that in a safe and respectful dialogue. It’s also about actually having a level of humanity and empathic communication. Now, that then makes it become a support group. If it was just about asking the question and having the debate, it could be poet’s corner in Hyde Park in London, right? Someone could just stand up on a box, ask their questions and have a debate with whoever walks along or not, and the way that was happening would be irrelevant, but that is not the case in your group given what you are saying.

**MW:** But I also rarely ask, “what really brings you here?”...

**MF:** …but you do set a contract in the way you speak to them. You welcome people. You are friendly in your interaction with them, and you said in your interview with me that you start the process but then you open it to the floor. So. In starting that process, you’re starting a contract about how we talk to each other in this group and how we behave with each other. That’s in the tone of voice you use, the way that you look at people, and in the way that you communicate with them. Then the question is: what happens if someone breaks that contract?

These are the things that then make it become a support group, rather than just a discussion group. I do think that there is something bigger here though about humanity. I actually think you’ve got a greater purpose…
**MW:** Well. Part of this whole PhD is about trying to get to the bottom of what that purpose might be, in a way...

**MF:** It feels like, in some way, you are trying not to face that about the group, but I think this is what I was interested in, and why I wanted to invite you, because I do think there is a greater point here that’s about how we exist in the world as it is as it is now, and how we relate to each other in that world and how we find strength in our vulnerabilities together.

**MW:** Yes. I mean, I have made some claims about the idea of emancipation and creating a sort of equal standing in what we don’t know rather than what we do know, and where I think this discussion with you might sit in a sort of map of a chapter is in relation to feedback regarding how timely the project feels, in the way that we have information at our fingertips, but what do we really know and what is our relationship to that access? Then, in relation to some of these claims about I am making about revelling in ignorance as an emancipatory act, in the last couple of years since I’ve been doing this there has been the growing prevalence of post-truth-fake-news-alternative-facts, focused on fostering our ignorance, as a way of rendering you under the thumb of the powers that be, and so this conflicts with my claim that turning towards ignorance can be freeing, but it’s not actually about just turning towards it but also recognising it and being vulnerable with it and being able to say: “Yes, I don’t know”.

**MF:** But, I don’t think your group is necessarily saying that it is ok not to know. There’s no value judgment to it.

**MW:** No. But then sometimes maybe that is important?

**MF:** Well. Let’s say you had a climate change denier sitting in your group, saying that they know the answer to these things and the answer is not what the scientists are saying. What you’re talking about is areas that you don’t know. How would you play out with that situation?

**MW:** Well. An example that I have actually brought up sometimes, if the conversation was labouring a bit, was an example that I came realise was a form of the heinous crime of alternative facts, when I would ask the group if anyone could adequately explain why it is more believable that the earth is round and rotates around the sun than it is a flat disk on the back of a giant turtle. Invariably no one could. So, I would ask: Are we not ignorant of that then? Even though it forms a foundation of life as we know it, and of course I don’t believe that it sits on the back of a giant turtle...

**MF:** You’re just asking the question, testing the hypothesis.
**MW:** But what I am doing there, except for my awareness, is perhaps not dissimilar to the climate change denier and what they try to do through espousing knowledge which is unfounded, or they think it’s founded I guess…

**MF:** Imagine if you then had someone in the group as this discussion might be happening, about climate change and denial etc., who lost family members because of a tsunami, and they had a direct impact of climate change in their world. It throws up the whole notion of purpose with your group once again…

**MW:** It seems to be that what keeps coming up in our conversation now is that it is in a sort of slip, in these moments that bring about a certain gravitas in the process, and without those moments then what happens to a support group?

I guess it is relatively easy in these support groups of mine, for it to go by without it slipping into these moments of gravitas…

**MF:** Is it a support group then? If no one in that group needs support from each other and they just want to have a discussion of ideas, is it a support group?

**MW:** Well. ‘Need’ is a very strong word, I think…

**MF:** Well. We all need things on different levels and different ways all the time.

**MW:** Do I need to have a discussion at *Ignotamus Anonymous*? Hhmm…

**MF:** On one level everyone is there because they need human interaction, because otherwise they would just go to their computer and type their question of what they don’t know into Google and come up with the answer

**MW:** They don’t come to these groups to answer questions but to ask them.

**MF:** Interesting…

**MW:** For me, I don’t need to know the answer to how traffic lights operate. It is too strong a word. But then I think that as an artist that has to regularly apply for funding, I am always asked why my projects need to happen, and I think that is quite absurd because the world is not going to stop turning if I don’t get my humble project up. This art project of mine doesn’t feature in Maslow’s triangle of hierarchical needs.

**MF:** I think that what I am saying is that on a humanity level it does, because I think that there are impacts from this group that are not actually, as we’ve
been talking about, you know, I do think there is a humanity need that comes out of this group, of social interaction and empathic communication and shared ideas and safe space. I do think all of that.

**MW:** Well this is where a lot of the art-world terms of ‘social practice’ and ‘relational aesthetics’ are used for this turn away from galleries and towards making work with and in-between people, and the artist bringing about contexts and situations rather than providing any content, and this is the field and discipline and history that I sit within and that there are a lot of criticisms of. Like the sort of utopic claims that artists make, and that’s why I’m doing this research here. When I came to thinking of this as a genuine support group, then that threw up problems, like I don’t have any training. I mean, now I have the validation from Dr. Mim, so back off everyone, but…

**MF:** …but you’re not a trained facilitator.

**MW:** No. But most of my projects do revolve around an art of conversation, but then I also occasionally receive funding and am paid to run meetings, so, I don’t know if that’s typical for a support group facilitator either?

**MF:** It can be. There’s different sorts of support groups.

**MW:** So. It’s not disingenuous because I am occasionally paid for this? That’s good to hear…

**MF:** Do you have regulars come to group?

**MW:** Not anymore. I have been running it for quite a while now and at first there were…

**MF:** But it’s a mixed bag now.

**MW:** Yeah. A friend came to a meeting recently and I said that it was good to see her at a meeting again, and she replied that she had not actually been before. I chastised her for being a ‘bad friend’ and she apologised for having never made it. When I asked her if she thought it was a genuine support group her instinct was that yes it was because it has been running for so long and that maybe over this time, as opposed to a one week run of a temporary art project, that when she realised it had been going for four years now that over this time it has worked towards legitimacy.

I probably shouldn’t actually be so hung up on the validity of it…

**MF:** I actually think that’s fine, to be hung up on the validity of it. But I do also
think that it hinges on this process versus outcome...

**MW:** ...But the outcome can be unrecognised?

**MF:** Totally. But I do think that everything you’re saying, about the art of conversation, compensation and emancipation, I think that’s all part of your outcome...

**MW:** But that’s not assessable?

**MF:** That’s what qualitative research is all about, communicating with people about those ideas.

**MW:** But I can’t say to someone: Did you feel emancipated?

**MF:** Not in those words, but you might say: did you feel a freedom in coming to the group? How did it affect your communication, your capacity to say what you’re thinking? How did it affect you?

**MW:** Maybe those are the questions I should be asking, because I have just been very open, asking: what happened and what do you think was achieved?

**MF:** Yeah, but what are you actually trying to find out about?

**MW:** Well, I, this whole PhD, which I have given the funky title of An Intellectual Adventure in Ignorance, is not just about ignorance as the content or idea of the support group, but being ignorant of what was going on when I ran these groups and trying to get to the bottom of that.

**MF:** Look, this may be a reflection of our disciplines, but if you were my PhD student then I would be saying that if you don’t know why you’re doing what you’re doing, then how can you be evaluating it, and to what end?

**MW:** Yeah. Well, I think that is the difference then. Because, well, the bigger picture of the PhD was that I was doing all sorts of projects and I came back to uni’ to find out what they’re about and what holds them all together. I had this hunch that they were all about playing and playing with people and playing with social forms. Then I was running this group with such regularity that it became research through this one project in particular. I felt like there was something more to this project, and didn’t know what that was and so endeavoured to find out. I still don’t know what it is, and maybe that is the difference, you know?

There’s a sentiment that understanding kills action in art-making, and I am
trying to balance that here. But I don’t actually believe that either. It’s about trying to put that hat on as the researcher, and then change the hat as the artist.

**MF:** So, if I said to you: what do you think about going and getting some training in group facilitation? What’s your instinctive response to that?

**MW:** I would say that I didn’t feel like I needed it for my support groups.

**MF:** Not just needed it, but it doesn’t speak to the point of the group, I would think. Not about you and your skills. I think there’s two things: There is whether or not you think your skills needed or not, but also, I think that’s your challenge. I would be surprised if you said, “yeah, I really think I need group facilitation skills” because your group and your purpose as you’ve outlined it already is that all of these other things that may come from it or come as a result of it, like the process is more important than the outcome, in which case, unless you’re scared of moments that will challenge you in your facilitation, you wouldn’t be trained.

**MW:** Well, this one moment when I asked the guy to leave was tense, but it was fine.

The students that you’re here teaching then, that are going to become social workers, do they need a qualification to do the work?

**MF:** No.

**MW:** And the students all know that and they want to work on the skills that they feel they will need?

**MF:** It gives you more than just group work skills.

**MW:** What’s the difference there, between group work and social work?

**MF:** Well. Group work is one of the interventions that a social worker might use. Social workers will use counselling, case work, community work, research, policy. These are all areas of intervention, and group work is one of those areas of intervention.

**MW:** ...and group work is?

**MF:** For social workers, usually, that is about groups that are run around an area of a common need or a common area of disadvantage.
MW: So. What I’ve done is I’ve assumed that there is a need here to talk about what you don’t know and understand…

MF: One of the first things I would teach the students is why do you think you need your group? What have you done to find out? Conduct a needs analysis, and find out whether your group is actually needed or wanted in this space. What we teach the students is going through every single step of a group, from the idea for it through to evaluating it at the end.

MW: So. Do you teach students to come up with their own support groups?

MF: Not necessarily, but what we do is we teach them to figure out whether, if you’re working with a community or a client group and you see a need for those clients, but remember I said that social work is all about enacting change, so, social work is about finding what the gaps are and then figuring out what the interventions are that will be able to address those gaps. So, if you had a group of people who had all gone through a tsunami, if the gap was people learning from each other’s experiences, then you might think a group is necessary…

MW: So then, do those folks that you’ve identified that might need this, do they need to identify that they need it too?

MF: Well. That’s part of what you might do is that you identify the need and that might be by interviewing people. It might be a survey, it might be talking to agency providers. But then once you’ve done that, you would then advertise your group and you would start to think about who was going to come, and how that was going to go, you know what I mean? So it may be that the group is an open group and what you’re doing is absolutely spot on. You put an ad up and people can come, and whoever comes comes…

MW: And then if no one comes, I guess a process has still taken place, but the outcome is that no one attended. Is that used as a way of assessing the success or failure?

MF: It could be, if that kept happening, and week after week no one turned up, but it might be that no one turned up because there was another activity happening in the library at the exact same time that had a big draw card or it could be that you didn’t advertise it properly or something was put in front of your ad so no one saw it.

MW: I have started running these meetings at Thirroul, which is a new place for the meetings, and for the first time in four years no one showed up for a meeting. Part of me thought that it might be because the provocation of
the project was too much, and the vulnerability it entails, but that would be making an assumption.

**MF:** But it could also be that in the population of Thirroul, people don’t go out on Thursday nights. This would be part of your evaluation, right? If you had done a needs analysis at the beginning in Thirroul, people might have told you that.

**MW:** Yes. So. The needs analysis for me only happened at the very beginning, when I said that I want to run a school of ignorance where people teach things they don’t know, but then the conversations on this were quite difficult to have. In a way, what I did was a needs analysis wherein this silly idea for a school was all well and good, but what in that process I identified as a real need was with regards to how we talk about what we don’t know and understand and what might happen if we do that. So, I guess that was an informal needs analysis of sorts?

**MF:** For sure, but before you started at Thirroul you might have wanted to do another one in that area to see if that was going to be appropriate.

**MW:** Yes. Ok. Alas.

**MF:** That’s ok.

**MW:** Well. Because we have to wrap shortly, something else I wanted to ask you was with regards to the contestability of what constitutes a support group. This badge that I am proudly wearing, of Mim saying that this is a real support group, you mentioned that your colleagues might disagree with you. What is this contestability around what constitutes the validity of a support group? What you’re saying here about process and outcome, is that gospel?

**MF:** No. That’s not gospel. That’s just my impression.

When I mentioned your support group to all the social workers that I interviewed, they all thought it was quite bizarre. Because it doesn’t have an express need and a social gap of some sort. It’s not a group of people who’ve been diagnosed with cancer coming together. It’s not a group of homicide victims coming together.

**MW:** This badge that I have claimed from you is not going to get you laughed out of town, I hope?

**MF:** Not at all. Because for me, I think there is a greater point about humanity in your group, and that this is the need and the gap that you are filling.
through people interacting face-to-face without any sort of mediation in a safe space that allows them to be vulnerable with their ignorance. We don’t have enough of this.

**MW:** So, for you that feels like it addresses a need but for these other people that thought it was bizarre, they don’t see that and there is the possibility of offence?

**MF:** No, not of offence, but possibly if it was a social worker running it, there would be a query about whether that was real social work. Remember when you asked whether social work students, do they know that other people can just run groups? There is a difference between why a social worker would be doing that work and why someone else would be a social worker.

**MW:** But it has begun to feel to me to be more and more like a genuine support group with a genuine need, although I have not articulated that need in the way that you have. Getting people to not call upon ubiquitous technological interfaces around them to bring up information...

**MF:** So, if it were a social worker running it, you would have had to have established that there was a need, whether it be about social isolation, whether it be about the impact of technology on individuals in this world, whether it be about increasing mental health issues as a result of these things. You would have had to have established what that need was, what that gap was, and how this group was going to work with those issues and allow those issue to be targeted, and that is a key component of social work and support groups.

**MW:** So, what actually is this idea of “support” in social work? Getting a bunch of say, cancer survivors together, who have been through the same thing, to just be present together for support?

**MF:** Well. That is peer support, but there is not only one form of support. Support is a very contested term.

**MW:** What’s contested about what constitutes support in your field?

**MF:** Because there’s all sorts of support that can be provided. Material support, psychological support, social support, intellectual support, physical support, and sometimes more than one at once, but the reason it is a contested term in social work is because social work is often working in a multidisciplinary space and those other disciplines that it works with, psychology, psychiatry, medicine, nursing, have all come from a scientific base. Whereas social work does as well, it does not come from the same
scientific base. What that means is that when a social worker says they are providing support that doesn’t have the same impact as if you are coming from this empirical base.

**MW:** Well. That’s the same with me, right?

**MF:** Yes. That’s why I said it is a context word, because as you are finding it is a difficult word to define, and how it feels for one person will be very different from another.

**MW:** I think that everything that you have said is quite helpful for me in trying to make the reconciliations I am grappling with at the moment.
Interview with Jade Kennedy, Indigenous Projects Officer at The University of Wollongong

10 May, 2018

JK: Let me give you some context. I’m a single Dad of four. I work this full-time job, in which at the moment I run a program across the university for 120 participants who are part of my program around embedding Aboriginal knowledges, but I’m also Chair of the Local Aboriginal Lands Council, which is a full time job unto itself, and I’m the custodian of a couple of significant sites within the region, which brings with it a consistent workload. So, I juggle lots of balls, and I choose to take that responsibility but it means that I end up very busy. But, for me, the greatest commodity that exists within the world is knowledge, and if I can contribute to somebody developing knowledges, awareness, capacity, respect and reciprocity, then I have done my ancestors justice. So. It is very, very important for me, as important as all these things I rattle off to you, to have conversations with people like yourself, because you have committed your energy, your mind, your efforts, into this same particular space. I have got a lost of respect for that.

MW: The flip side of that then, of ignorance, does that then become whatever the opposite of a commodity is? A problem not to shy away from but to deal with in some way?

JK: Well, how long have you worked within academia, Malcolm?

MW: Four or five years, give or take.

JK: So, when you reflect on that space, consider the way in which is ignorance is positioned from an academic standpoint. Academia is a whole range of many things, but it is also diseased with ego and the ego that sits within this space positions things like ignorance as an absolute forbidden realm, right? Because to be ignorant is to actually acknowledge that you don’t know, and to acknowledge that you don’t know as an academic questions your credibility and validity within that space.

MW: That to me is part of the problem though, because isn’t research about new frontiers of new understandings and new knowledge, and to do that, well, how do you do that research and also avoid being ignorant in some way?

JK: One hundred percent. For those that I believe are interested in enlightenment and a pure of heart sort of progression in life that are
genuinely in the space to learn, and there’s a ton of those people out there, 
but as universities have become corporatised and quite vocational in their 
delivery, that spiritual, that interpersonal, that relationship between the 
physical and the mental, around the yearning and journeying for knowledge is 
less found.

MW: Because, if this is your job in the corporate environment, then suddenly 
your ignorance is a weakness, and you could lose your tenure, or whatever?

JK: Well, ignorance becomes viewed as a weakness in the sense that you 
may not be viewed or seen or understood as an expert. Right? As opposed 
to the empowerment that comes with allowing yourself to acknowledge your 
ignorance because it is freeing. But, imagine you have to wear this cloak, or 
you have to wear this mask, this shield, that says, every day I have to put this 
whatever on and throughout every engagement I have, I can’t let it slip that I 
do not know.

MW: Because, it would be not just your job, but how embarrassing! Or, you 
were talking about your children before, but even as a father, when they turn 
to you for enlightenment, and you have to say: “I don’t know”, and they think: 
“But, you’re a grown up, shouldn’t you know everything?”

JK: Exactly, but the minute you can legitimately engage in that conversation, 
through the acknowledgement of unknowing, you can turn that perceived 
weakness into an actual strength. Ignorance is an interesting term, because 
I think when we were originally speaking, we didn’t flesh out our shared 
understandings or discuss or debate some of the connotations that go with 
that term, right? So. Ignorance, in a lot of the conversations that I engage in 
through my multiple worlds: “Oh, Jade, they didn’t mean to be racist in that 
instance. They were just ignorant”. Right? Or: “Don’t take that personally, they 
just don’t know. It’s from a place of ignorance, not a place of intent”. Right? 
So, for me, that positions the use of the term differently at times, than saying 
somebody is ignorant simply based on the fact of not having an opportunity 
to know. Right? So, what I am speaking about in this space is embracing the 
unknown, and one space that I’m in discussions around at the moment is 
the way that Aboriginal people have this burden placed upon them by the 
dominant culture to be proving who they are and how they are connected 
to country. Right? My name is Jade, I’m a Kennedy and I’m a Yuin man. I can 
actually tell you that my Aboriginal name is Moora Bri Burai. Right? My national 
totem is Umbarra. My family totem is Doonooch, and my personal totem: I 
don’t speak that aloud.¹ Right? So, I can speak to this extent. You might bump

¹. Being that Indigenous knowledge is primarily passed on through forms of oral communication, Kennedy 
suggests after our interview that these can only ever be approximations of spelling when transcribed into 
English.
into another Aboriginal person tomorrow who says my name is this, and I don’t know my tribal group, I don’t know any of that stuff. And so it becomes this weird dichotomy of going, am I “blacker” because I can rattle off these terms? And Non-Aboriginal Australia looks and says, well this guy must have some culture, which probably makes him blacker and more legit and authentic. Right? Whereas, this person over here, they’re not really probably Aboriginal or it’s probably their great, great, great grandmother, and the burden of the impacts of colonisation are shifted and projected onto both types of Aboriginal people in this example. Right? Where the actual ownership for the inability for this person to be unable to answer those things, is actually on the colonial system, but no Aboriginal person wants to admit or acknowledged that. Right? No Aboriginal person wants to take on and acknowledge that they have had their identity removed through this process. That they have had their language removed, as well as their culture, country relationships, their dreaming. They’ve had all of these things removed, right? Culminated into the term “identity”. Right? But they are too afraid within the system and the dynamic of this set up between white and black Australia to actually admit and acknowledge to say, “I don’t know”. Right?

_MW:_ So this then is tied in with your advocacy for saying “I don’t know”?

JK: What I’m saying is that in saying, “I don’t know”, we are naming it, and unless we name it, we cannot begin to heal it. So, this is where I come from in terms of acknowledging the unknowing, the not understanding, the ignorance, however we really want to deconstruct that term and comprehend where it sits. But the minute that we become brave in that space of vulnerability together, where I am like you – not entirely certain – then can we, in such a space, dialogue, engage, construct and co-create some sort of shared understanding. And you cannot have that learning progression without the acknowledgement of unknowing. Because if you go, look, you’re safe, or not safe but brave, and say to me, “Oh, I’m not sure”, and I go, “I’m a big academic. Look at my office. I know what I’m talking about, but I’m actually a little bit too busy to share with you today what I do and don’t know, but trust me, I know and I feel for you in not knowing”. Right? What does that do? What becomes the response? You walk away not knowing. I remain having to maintain this mask and shield and perpetuate the fear that exists around allowing ourselves to be vulnerable and therefore name the issue and therefore heal the problem.

_MW:_ But in that way, I don’t know if you would agree, but I can see why this hypothetical version of you as the academic would do that, because then you retain all the power and nothing changes. Maybe it’s a bit much, and we are being extreme and provocative, but this is part of the manufacturing and control of ignorance, like that which cigarette companies and climate change
deniers trade off. So, when you don’t have time for me to let me in on the knowledge you have, you keep me in the dark because you want to keep me at a distance and subordinate...

**JK:** Absolutely. I gate keep!

**MW:** ...and that’s even what these ethics forms are about, right?

**JK:** Exactly. Or, what applecart are we going to disrupt, or what rock are we going to lift and be unsure about what we find, because there is absolutely, for some individuals and structures, not just individuals, because at times universities need to maintain their power...

**MW:** Well, aren’t you and these things you’re advocating for, aren’t you a bit of a nuisance for them? Do you find yourself getting into trouble?

**JK:** To give you a brief history, I have been fired four times from this institution. Right. The only reason why they bring me back is because of the nuanced knowledges that I have to contribute. I have also matured a bit, and I am not looking to get fired again, but I have been because there is this term ‘reconciliation’ that we throw around in Australia today. In the majority of other countries where they throw this term around, they attach the word ‘truth’. “Truth and Reconciliation Councils”. “Truth and Reconciliation Projects”. Within Africa, Canada and Europe, it is generally brought out of major conflicts. It’s usually a response to a wall, or some sort of civil rights action where there has been a fracture or dislocation within a society or a large community, or an entire country, like Serbia, but what I find difficult is that within Australia, reconciliation has an entirely different connotation and meaning, and there’s no attachment of the truth. And truth means honesty. And I can’t look you in the eye and say to you that I know something if I don’t. How can I authentically represent a position if I know nothing about it? So what happens is the perpetuating dishonesty based on a stance where you don’t learn, I don’t learn, and we complicate and confuse every single person that we touch thereafter in relation to whatever topic that is. How can that be good for our society?

**MW:** And is this what is getting you into trouble, calling that out?

**JK:** Absolutely. So, I’ll say: “You keep using this word reconciliation, but how can you reconcile something that’s never been conciled?” Right? Reconciliation means bringing back together something that was once whole, right? Aboriginal Australia and Non-Aboriginal Australia were never one. Right? So I’ll say things like this. I’ll say things like, “you’re acknowledging the wrong countries” Right? I’ll say things like, “you don’t know what Aboriginal
country this is, but you profess to”. I’ll say things like, “the way in which you’re actually engaging with Aboriginal Australia at the moment is wrong”, and they’ve got a couple of million dollar grants based on methodologies to do things and I’ll say, “…but it’s wrong”. They’ll say: “We want a reconciliation action plan”, and I’ll say: “How dare you insult me and my people with your policies”, right? Because in each of these instances, you’ve got a box-ticking exercise where textbook blacks have been able to achieve roles within the institution, but they’ve allowed themselves to simply be accountable to the institution, not accountable to the actual community. And none of them would dare say within this institution that they don’t know, but I’ll call them on it.

**MW:** So. You’re good at making friends?

**JK:** *Laughs.* Yeah. I walk alone a lot, but I’ve always been taught that a man of many friends is usually not a very effective man. I’m a massive advocate for being vulnerable. I think that the truest essence of learning comes from when we are at our most vulnerable. The real things in our lives that shape the way in which we see the world, that shape the way in which we actually behave, that shape the way in which we value, come from those moments and experiences in our lives where we have been the most vulnerable.

**MW:** How then, with academics and teachers and experts and students in my classes and with our families and with everyone else, do we teach and encourage people to take this vulnerable leap into ignorance together?

**JK:** I love the way in which you’ve considered the multiple contexts there, and context actually becomes one of the most significant aspects within this practice because it’s not a matter of content in any way, shape or form.

**MW:** Oh! Now I could just hand this recording in right now that you have said this, because I have said the same thing in my research. That it is about context rather than content, and we need to create contexts in which to feel comfortable to make those vulnerable leaps. This is really exciting for me to hear someone else describe such a practice in the same words. Sorry. Keep going…

**JK:** Absolutely. Because you have to be able to engage the person or persons that you are in that relationship with in that moment of shared dialogue. Or it doesn’t always have to be dialogue. It can just be the fact that we’re sitting in the same place, but generally, from my experience, it needs to be a situation where we are in close physical proximity, not sitting in each other’s laps, but we need to be sitting with each other.

**MW:** So that is similar to these support groups that I run. We just sit in a circle
of chairs together to discuss our ignorance.

**JK:** Circles are very significant from an Aboriginal perspective.

**MW:** I’m completely ignorant. Tell me more!

**JK:** It’s the ‘Yarning Circle Methodology’, and it is an entire methodology. There is a spiralling of knowledge in some instances, and there’s a zigzag of knowledge in other instances, but you have approaches and methods that bring these sorts of things out. So, you have a sharing. There is a getting-to-know-each-other rapport-building phase. We have a term called ngapartji ngapartji, which is the act of giving and taking. So, I give you something, you give me something. We never leave each other without a trade, and that trade can simply be niceties, a generosity of spirit, a handshake, a hug, a beer, but there is always the giving and receiving of something in every relational engagement. I try really hard to be overly generous in these spaces because that’s one of the philosophies that I have been raised to live by. There is the opportunity for debriefing. There’s a construction of understanding. So when you sit in a circle, it facilitates the construction of a shared understanding and it does no longer position you as an individual because there’s no head of the table. There’s no beginning and there’s no end.

**MW:** Like in a classroom. The students think it is quite novel or kooky the way I do this, but I have them remove all the tables and chairs and we sit in a circle together and discuss the weekly readings.

**JK:** You’ve been using our methodology...

**MW:** I’ve always thought of it as another support group...

**JK:** I would love to come and help you essentially just refine some of your practices to model some of ours, because we’ve been doing this forever, right?

**MW:** Well, I just made this ignorant leap, right? Part of what I do as an artist is take these social forms as the starting point for artworks. So, I started these support groups for ignorance and I thought maybe I should go to a support group to see what it’s like. But then I thought that might be unethical. I don’t want to go there to just observe people having these difficult times in life, and either lie and say I am one of them or treat the space like a zoo for my observations. I know Indigenous folks face this all the time, when someone might, for example, want to make a theatre show that involves Indigenous representation, and the artist does a sort of box-ticking exercise of engagement and once they have everything they want they say: “Ok. Thanks!
Might see you around some time..."

**JK:** Laughs. Look, I just get blessed consistently. Here is something that you’ve been engaging with and I get this beautiful resonance within my world, the way in which all things happen for a reason. If you look at the bottom few points [of a Yarning Circle diagram], meaning / defining / theming, trust / openness / safe spaces for dialogue, honesty / being present / communicative / respectful / meaningful. They are all articulations of vulnerability and actual methods to articulate vulnerability within these dialogues and relationships.

**MW:** ...and in relation to some of the various different folks that you’re engaging with about their ignorance, do you always call that a Yarning Circle when you’re working with them?

**JK:** There’s no need to be so explicit. When I have formal gatherings, all of them are within Yarning Circles. When I have informal gatherings, the circle may not be present physically. When we have a formal gathering, there is a physical circle created, at times there is a fire and at other times there is not. All of these guys are engaging in formal Yarning Circles with very strict protocols. Right? One person speaks at a time. It flows one way every time.

**MW:** ...and you would set that direction in place from the commencement?

**JK:** Yes. There is a very strict protocol. Ok. Then what I will do is I will start, and this shit is fucking amazing. I’ll tell you how it works. I deliberately start because I have done these all my life, and I will be as vulnerable as fuck. I’ll start with something that’s happened to me that week that may bring myself to tears, and you watch every single person as the circle starts to move and before you know it, everybody’s sharing a same or similar experience that’s happened to them, totally unknowingly, and there’s a strength and power that starts to occur in the synergy of thought, and the more and more you go around, the more and more the same we start to connect to each other as, through the one shared story. It’s very powerful. It’s fucking tears left, right and centre, man. It’s heavy. But it’s that interconnectedness of the physical, the mental and the spiritual, and it all starts by one person and then it starts to culminate because two persons, three persons and four persons have then been vulnerable. And what ends up occurring is that fifth person, you either be vulnerable or you become the minority that’s not vulnerable. How do you thereafter assume a space and a seat within the circle? Right? Because this is the thing: If I face you and not be vulnerable and put the mask on, what safety does that give you to be vulnerable?

If we have a yarn with you and openly share something, like having had an
itch down there for fucking days, would you then be more likely to share that? Silliest of examples, but at the same time, we have opened a door and we’re asking you to identify with us.

**MW:** I wonder if, in this leading by example, which is what I do within my support groups for ignorance as well, to get the ball rolling and everyone can model their behaviour on mine and then on each other, although we don’t go around in a particular order, but I wonder about the ethics of this strategy, because I know what I’m doing and I know that it works as a way of getting people to open up and I wonder whether that’s manipulative in some way?

Artists often get really hung up on getting the ethics of what they are doing right...

**JK:** Do they?

**MW:** Well. Most of them like the pretence of it at least. It’s about making sure you do your best to do right by everyone, or to have a box ticked by someone that you have done right, and often at the expense of the art itself. So, I wonder about the ethics of my possible manipulation in relation to this practice...

**JK:** Look. Can I just say: I hate the university ethics system. The majority of knowledge that we base whatever we call new knowledge on today, comes from the remnants of being ridiculously unethical. The majority of theories and methodologies, think about fucking anthropology and ethnography, you know, these types of approaches have born themselves out of the exploitation of other people. Right? Now we turn around and we suppress and oppress other peoples in this space by saying: follow these fucking ridiculous rules.

And what really frustrates me with these ethics protocols is that they impose a western construct, at times, over things that don’t relate to that context. Right?

If you have a personal relationship with somebody, I’ll tell you, it doesn’t matter how many of the rules that you follow within the methodological approach or whatever it might be. You can’t unhear what you’ve heard. You can’t not feel what you felt. You cannot [not] build inferences based on the relationship you have. Then all of a sudden you’ve got some form that says, well, you can’t interpret it that way because it’s not generalisable, or whatever. It’s a flawed system that actually, in relation to the stuff we’re talking about, perpetuates yet again the ongoingness of masking ignorance. It encourages us yet again to deny the fact that we don’t know. Not in terms of the searching, but in who I approach to find the answers. Because if you go
Interviews

A Bigger Book of Ignorance

to me: “Jade, can you talk to me about ignorance?” Well, I will feel the need to
tell you about ignorance. You’ve come to me, searching, and I want to be able
to answer you, especially if you come to me with some cultural questions, and
culture is a very, very, very pertinent topic when it comes to the questions
that you’re asking. Especially Aboriginal culture, because no Aborigine in this
country wants to deny the fact that they don’t know.

MW: Like what we were talking about before, of not knowing your totems…

JK: You’ve got a situation where my people are the first of the first Aborigines
in Australia to be impacted by invasion. Smallpox and other like diseases
ekilled 80 per cent of that population within 10 years. Eighty per cent. And, the
majority of that 80 per cent were the elderly who had all the knowledge, it
was the old and the young essentially. But all the knowledge sat within that
hierarchy, right? How can we be expected to know, but we’re consistently
placed in a situation where the burden of proof is upon us from the colonial
construct that exists today.

MW: So. What I want to say is that we should all be transparent about what we
do and don’t know…

JK: The way I put it is: Just own your shit. I can do this. I can’t do this. I know
this. I don’t know this.

MW: But isn’t the problem then that those that are without that knowledge will
become exploited…

JK: But the point I want to say is that the ability to acknowledge and be
honest around your ignorance becomes convoluted in problems of identity,
problems around governance and structures, around institutions and
institutionalisation. There are people who might possibly within their own
integrity, want to be free of the burden of having to hide the fact that they
don’t, but there are systems and spaces and contexts and pressures that
mean they are not in that space. So. We have named a few different contexts.
You’ve got a power struggle between the teacher and student. They’ll be
different layers of power struggles between lovers. There’ll be power struggles
between elders and young’uns, parents and children, bosses and employees,
and to me, the burden of responsibility to lead around the celebration of not
knowing is the responsibility of those with the most power.

MW: And then, leading by example might lead us all towards some sort of
utopic like dream world, or what happens? What is the result?

JK: It’s reconciliation. On so many levels. Reconciliation of identity.
Reconciliation of relationship. Reconciliation of the unknowing. It’s an enactment and it’s a journey, and it never actually completes. The circle never actually closes. It’s just that journey of getting closer and closer and closer...

**MW:** Because of course there will always be things that you don’t know, and this is part of the problem too...

**JK:** But it’s not a problem!

**MW:** No, but part of the problem in making the reconciliation is that we see it as a problem, and therein in lies the problem that we have perhaps in making the step is that knowledge is finite whereas ignorance is infinite...

**JK:** But knowledge is not necessarily finite either. It is continually developing. It is a journey within a journey.

**MW:** Well. The knowledge you possess at any one given moment is finite, but it’s also expanding…and it would maybe be debilitating if you woke up in the morning and thought: there’s just so much I don’t know. But we want to make it healthy to turn towards that and encourage it.

**JK:** I absolutely take your point, but right now I’m going to need to be really disrespectful because I need to give integrity to this next meeting, but we can always have this discussion again.
LITTLE BOOK OF IGNORANCE
This is a complete reprint of The Little Book of Ignorance.
First published, July 2013.
This Little Book of Ignorance belongs to:

(who is ignorant)
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Sirius is eight-point-six light years away
Arcturus is thirty-seven

The past is the past and it’s here to stay

Wikipedia is heaven
When you don’t want to remember anymore.

Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, We Real Cool
In 1818 French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot discovered that he was able to teach what he himself did not know. Not only was knowledge not necessary to teach but explication was also not necessary to the act of learning. The results of this unusual experiment in pedagogy led him to announce that “everything was in everything”, that all people were equally intelligent and it is only in the will to use intelligence that people differ. Jacotot referred to his philosophical methodology as “intellectual emancipation”.

Nearly ninety years later Sigmund Freud advocated the unconscious as the birthplace of our automatic thoughts and implicit knowledge, as well as the origin of our subliminal perceptions and feelings. To situate such a lateral phenomena in the history of modern Europe, Freud exemplified his school of thought with a series of humiliating “narcissistic illnesses” that informed his belief. The first was the Copernican Revolution’, where Nicolaus Copernicus used his heliocentric cosmology to demonstrate that the Earth revolves around the Sun, rather than the other way around, and thus deprived humankind of our belief up until that point that we were the center of the universe. Next Charles Darwin demonstrated the origin of our species, which shattered the belief that we held a privileged and superior standing among living beings.
Then Freud proposed the predominant role that our unconscious plays in basic thinking processes. With this eventually came perhaps the greatest humiliation of all - our brains are merely computing machines for data processing! Our sense of freedom and autonomy is merely our user-generated illusion of running the most sophisticated machine on the planet. Agency is not just a fallacy of contemporary art – It is a fallacy of the self-perpetuating human condition.

It is true that this introduction has been written through a terse reading of a series of tenuously related Wikipedia articles. Everyone in this age of hysterical technological immediacy can instantly be an ‘expert’. We can almost outsource our knowledge bank entirely to the internet. How often are heated arguments eventually settled by the quick ‘Googling’ of a subject?

‘Googling’ might be necessary if one wishes to trace the source material for those Wikipedia articles, as footnotes have deliberately been left out - both here in this introduction and throughout the rest of this Little Book of Ignorance. Robert Anton Wilson did the same in Prometheus Rising, a book which along with Jacques Rancière’s fashionable treatises on ‘emancipation’ were a large inspiration for the project Ignoramus Anonymous, which takes the form of a support group for the ignorant – i.e. anyone and everyone. Wilson refers to the footnote as providing an “academic stink” that would turn off the average reader. Stephen Hawking removed all the equations (except one, guess which?) from A Brief History of Time for this same reason. Perhaps the removal of this “academic stink” here is a deliberate personal ignorance, based on the false assumption that this publication is gifted to the reader free of charge as a companion piece to the support group and so therefore these usual peripheries are not necessary. Besides, with Ignoramus Anonymous being largely about democratizing the intelligentsia, and with this little book acting as a trace of the support group in which those ideas seek to live on and inspire further reflection on ignorance, this decision felt entirely appropriate.

If the reader is really keen on sources for further enquiry then the ‘Information Age’ that is the 21st Century presents knowledge as a resource that is spontaneously retrievable, with little risk for the successive humiliations like those outlined by Freud. Thankfully too, because the degree of terror derived from realising our ignorances can be debilitating. From the fear of getting ourselves into trouble, to being caused embarrassment or to what might happen to our sense of self and identity if everything we have founded ourselves on turns out to be wrong. Being in a state of ignorance, as those who doubted both Copernicus and Darwin could attest, truly is a state of bliss. Perhaps the only times we allow such questions to be provoked in us is when watching a post-apocalyptic film or television program founded on a seduction
into the conceit of - “What would you do in this critical situation when left to nothing but your own devices??” Often these situations then create telling scenarios of who these characters ‘really are’ (as they are grossly outnumbered by zombies….or whatever).

Perhaps then it is what we don’t know and don’t understand that truly shapes who we are and our outlook of the world.

In A Brief History of Time Hawking notes that it seems like it is only children who are simple enough to ask the really clever questions, like - “Why does time move forwards and not backwards?” The poor adults who then have to try to answer these questions, without sounding condensing, are largely stumped to provide an adequate explanation to what is a fundamental law that governs life as we know it.

If only we were able to ask questions such as these.

*Ignoramus Anonymous* is a space to ask these questions. A safe space devised to revel in that which we do not know and that which we do not know that we do not know. There will always be a great deal more of the world that we do not know and understand than that which we do. Even less that we can know for sure. Even less still that we can actively and accurately pass on to others. However this is not a space for teaching, it is a space for support. It is hoped that this support provide a joyful reflection on the cultural phenomenon of ignorance, including the cultural status of different forms of knowledge and ignorance. May it move towards an intellectual emancipation that takes the form of a simple circle in which our ignorance forces us to confront a truly democratic equality with one another.

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Malcolm Whittaker is a young man from Sydney who works as an interdisciplinary artist, writer and performer. He can’t be sure why he does this. But it feels right. Most of the time.
EXERCISE

According to the Dunning-Kruger effect, the ignorant lack the competence to realise their own ignorance and so consider themself superior to everyone else.

This exercise has been devised to address such a lack of awareness in oneself regarding your everyday experiences.

Answering the following questions will begin a pathway towards awareness, and perhaps even the delicate process of "recovery". Feel free to address this non-definitive questionnaire in the manner that best suits you.

• Describe embarrassing or humiliating incidents in your life. Were they related to your ignorance? If so, how?
• If other people have ever corrected you, then write down what they have said.
• Have ignorant behaviours ever seriously damaged your relationships with other people? If so, list the relationships and how you damaged them.
• Have you ever felt self-righteous? Explain the circumstances and whether you still feel you were justified.
• Describe any illnesses that have resulted from your ignorant behaviour.
• Describe incidents where you expressed inappropriate anger towards other people. Can this be traced back to ignorance?
• List the positive and negative aspects of an absolute belief in a chosen God and the associated religion.
• Have you ever rationalized what you now recognize as ignorant behavior? If so, in what way?
• Have you avoided people because they did not share in or approve of your disposition? If so, list these people and situations.
• How would you answer the question "Who am I"?
• Describe who or what you trust and to what degree. Why?
• In what do you find meaning?
• Describe the faults that you most detest in others. Do you ever have any of these traits yourself?
• Have you failed to do things that you KNOW that you should have done? If so, then explain in detail?

• What are your fears? On what were they founded? How have they caused you difficulty in your life?

• How much of your life have you used up already? If you drew a time line of your life, where would you be now?

• What are you most ashamed of in your life?

• Do you see any patterns in your ignorant behaviour? If so, explain them in detail.

• What have you done to cover and conceal your ignorant behaviour? What other deceptions did this lead to?

• List your major defects of character and what you plan to do when these defects become evident.

• Describe in detail what you think that your life will be like with your defects of character removed from you.

• What would you do if you were granted three wishes?

• How have you hurt yourself by practicing your ignorance?

• How much time and energy have you lost from your ignorant behaviour? What do you think you would have done or become had it not been for your ignorant behaviour?

• How would you describe a belief in a variety of different Gods and Higher Powers to a child?

• What are your favorite sources of wisdom and knowledge on healthy values? Why?

• Has anything you ever read convinced you to change in some fundamental or deep way? Why?

• If you were stranded on a desert island with only one book, which book would you take? Why?

In times of crisis please contact your sponsor, Malcolm Whittaker, on phone number +614 03 925 392
The Vorticist’s bet on the wrong horse!
Balla was a terrible judge of character!
Radish Abstractionists the lot of them!

Mitchel Cumming is the founder/director of The Association for the Facilitation of Access to Art for Australian Residents (AFAAAR).
The third day I was overseas last year I got robbed. I was in Phnom Penh walking along the river, past Tuk-Tuk drivers and motos, tiny stalls selling apples and fresh coconuts. A couple called out to me in English.

Clark Kent! My friend hello! Clark Kent!

I often get called stupid shit like this because of my glasses. But I was keen to be involved, immersed in the culture, whatever. So I talked to the couple, they were Thai they said, holidaying to visit a cousin. One of their sisters was going to live in Melbourne next year. Could I tell her about Melbourne? They would love to have me eat dinner at their cousin’s house tonight and talk to them about Australia. Ok.

I hopped on the back of their moto and we circled through the city, past big hotels, ATM machines in little phone booth glass boxes, street vendors and a lot of dogs, finally arriving down a little back alley. A garage door opens up into an apartment. The green-white tiles and diffused sunlight make it look sort of magic. I sit down at a coffee table and meet an older man, the cousin, who has better English than the rest. I ask for a beer and we talk.

He works for casinos, running the high roller rooms. He never gambles because he knows the odds. He never gambles. He wins, he says. He can show me how to win. There’s a special game on later tonight, right here that a man from Myanmar is coming to play. But the man from Myanmar never wants to pay the dealer enough, so there’s a way we can get his money. He can show me. He thinks I have what it takes.

We have dinner and then I’m ushered into a bedroom where a tiny card table is laid out in the corner. I’m sitting in the corner of the room with the older man opposite and the man I first met next to me. I feel a little squished. They start to teach me the game which is a combo of poker and blackjack called international poker. Then they teach me how to cheat. The older man touches different parts of his arm like a clock, to show me what cards my opponent would have. Then he taps his ring to tell me to bet, or resettles his glasses to
tell me to fold. We have a few practice runs and I catch on pretty quickly. Then the man from Myanmar comes.

I play this man and, cheating, I win like $30,000. Ten grand of which is dumped on the table in front of me in US cash. But before the last hand (which I know I will win) is revealed, the man from Myanmar says he needs to see all the cash. Not just the ten grand the dealer has put down. That I can’t play on credit anymore since it’s a lot of money. He gets a call from his girlfriend and leaves. I stand to make $20,000 because the older man who taught me to cheat gets a cut. But before this can happen we need enough cash to put down on the table. The older man says he will call his loan shark friend to raise the money, but that I need to get out as much cash as I can to help too. They take my camera and my Ipod from my bag as collateral and put me on the back of a moto with a totally new guy who I haven’t seen yet. He drives me to one of the ATM’s. I think I’ll be ok because I know my withdrawal limit is only $200 a day. But maybe this ATM is cracked or something because I get out like $1200 easy. From outside the glass box the new guy asks me to hurry up. I try not to hand over the money but the original man from the river side arrives on another moto and takes it, saying he’ll bring it to the loan shark. The fiction is starting break apart a bit. The loan shark isn’t the one who needs the money.

I get dropped out the front of a hotel and told to wait, that they’ll be back to get me soon.

I wait there for half an hour. Still sort of believing.

This is a photo of me about 4 days later.

Mark Rogers is a playwright and theatre-maker. He works with Applespiel, Bodysnatchers and runs Woodcourt Art Theatre out of his lounge room.
Lucy Parakhina. Somewhere on the east coast of Tasmania, 10:52am - 23rd January 2012.

18.
BEWARE OF FACTS!

CATHERINE RYAN

An Unsystematic Consideration of Ignorance (with reference to Socrates, Rancière, Breton, Wordsworth, Cervantes, Montaigne, Kant and Artaud).
I know nothing except the fact of my ignorance.

- Socrates

So you find yourself saying to someone, I need to know more, I’m ignorant of so many subjects and it’s an embarrassment to me. You decide, therefore, to cure your ignorance, resolving to do so by learning more facts.

Perhaps ignorance can be remedied by learning things. This is one image of knowledge: a pile of accumulating facts that are gathered together during the course of research. You find a piece of information from Wikipedia: you take it and add it to the pile of things you know. You find another related fact—knowledge about the tendencies of a particular artistic movement, a factoid about how many bones are in the human ear—and place this piece of information next to the others. Once a sufficient number of facts are in the pile, connections and inferences can be drawn between them: perhaps if you memorise enough small insights about how the human body works you will be less susceptible to being preyed upon by charlatans spruiking the benefits of superfoods or abstinence from sugar. Maybe you will sound more clever at cocktail parties by mentioning the name “Rancière”.

But does a large pile of facts make its possessor less ignorant? The number of facts to be gleaned about the world, after all, is almost infinite. Knowledge is a light that cuts through the darkness of ignorance, but the dark lands of ignorance are almost infinite: they sweep in all directions, further than the eye can see. If we can never entirely conquer the unknown, if there is always more in darkness than in light, then can we ever say that we have ceased to be ignorant? Also, no matter how many facts we may accumulate, what is to say that all these pieces of trivia teach us anything important? Does possessing a pile of facts make us wise?
Perhaps we are too hasty in associating ignorance with shame, incompetence and humiliation. Ignorance may not be such a terrible thing. For in fact there are many laudable individuals who have chosen ignorance deliberately. Take, for instance, the figure of Socrates, the first philosopher. Socrates engaged in dialogue with citizens in the agora, or marketplace, of ancient Athens about topics such as the definition of truth, the nature of love, the purpose of government. He skilfully debated these weighty subjects with important figures of his day, including politicians, speech makers and professional orators. Above all, Socrates’ method as an educator was to get his interlocutors to recognise and admit their ignorance. What is important to note is that he did so, not by adopting the position of an expert in the subjects about which he was discoursing, but rather by insisting—the famous Socratic irony—that he himself knew nothing.

Should we really be embarrassed, then, if we do not know the difference between quantum mechanics and string theory? If we muddle Badiou and Bourdieu? Should we instead follow the example of artists, and affirm our ignorance?

Do not artists, those professionals of inspiration to whom our society grants prestige, take some of their special powers from their ignorance? When artists make surprising connections between different subject matters, aren’t they displaying and making a virtue of their ignorance of the proper ways of categorising things? The ignorance of artists is a technique, a skill, in keeping with André Breton’s claim that “Our brains are dulled by the incurable mania of wanting to make the unknown known, classifiable.”

When artists forego acquiring systematic knowledge of x or y while working on a project about x or y—when they lift suggestive sentences from French philosophers without knowledge of these passages’ proper contexts—are they actively choosing ignorance as a means of remaining in a state of wonder? After all, as Wordsworth says of the scientific impulse to rationally carve up the world, “We murder to dissect”.

Perhaps what is most dangerous is not ignorance itself but the act of claiming to possess the knowledge that you do not have, out of a belief that knowledge—the pile of facts—bathes you in the reflected light of its authority. As Cervantes reminds us, it is easy to cite famous names to create the appearance of erudition. We should be wary of individuals whose true ambition is to merely stand in the company of those who know, out of a misguided sense that you are judged by the company you keep.
There are many varieties of this species: the name-dropper is one of them. Another is the person who feels superior because they live in a technologically advanced society. Sartre speaks, for example, of a character in Cocteau’s story “Round the World in 80 Hours” who declares, because he is flying over mountains in an aeroplane, “Man is magnificent!” Sartre says that this character’s exclamation

signifies that although I personally have not built aeroplanes, I have the benefit of those particular inventions and that I personally, being a man, can consider myself responsible for, and honoured by, achievements that are peculiar to some men.

The feeling that all the repositories of information ever accumulated by humankind are one short Wikipedia search away from us—perhaps this makes the overestimation of our capacities more tempting. But in truth, each one of us has contributed very little to the learning of our age. Our civilisation’s accumulation of great stores of data bestows little virtue on each of us buffoons. It is only arrogance and a misrecognition of our limited powers that inclines us to think otherwise.

In truth, no one knows much, so there is no shame in being honest about our lack of learning. As Montaigne says, “recognising our ignorance is one of the surest and most beautiful witnesses to our judgement”. Accordingly, “Anyone who catches me out in ignorance does me no harm”.

We should not run away from our ignorance, for it is no crime. Rather than versing ourselves in the opinions handed down by authorities, it is more important that we have what Kant calls the courage to use our own reason. The first step is to have the humility to acknowledge that you are, like me, ignorant. The recognition of your ignorance can then be taken as an invitation to start to think for yourself.

(Of course, as Artaud reminds us, it can be the work of an entire day just to have a single thought.)

Catherine Ryan is an ignorant writer and artist from Melbourne. She (and Amy Spiers) made the Sydney Harbour Bridge vanish. Foucault is her boyfriend.
FUNG FACT

Did you know that the world is not round and does not revolve around the sun but that it is really a flat plate supported on the back of a giant turtle?

This turtle is supported on the back of another turtle, which is supported on the back of another turtle, which is supported on the back of another turtle, which is supported on the back of another turtle. It's just turtles turtles turtles all the way down.
UNDERSTAND THE TECHNOLOGY

OR LIVE IN A WORLD OF SHIT
Lately I have been practising a wilful ignorance of several things that take up a disproportionate amount of my time. These are: website and logo design, applying makeup, gallery based art exhibitions and changing a flat tyre on my bike. Together they do not constitute a life changing mantra, but their constant appearance on my radar has not diminished my raging desire to remain passionately and wilfully ignorant on these things. In fact, their constant reoccurrence has motivated me to take an explicit stance on things that I do not wish to know about.

In order of appearance I will justify my passionate wilful ignorance.

Website design and logos. In a world crowded with digital surfaces and hypertext, the web interface takes up a vast acreage of the visual communication highway and so there is little reason to spend glazing your eyeballs over bad design or dysfunctional web navigation. Designers in the graphic and web worlds spend years honing their skills determining what works best for the eyeball and information flow. I don’t. I would love to hear about what you think are the best options for the design of visual data on a web page. Logos are also a miniature world of communication that I respect but have little desire to know the how and why. Tell me what works and why, I’m fascinated. But I do not have an expert opinion, nor do I desire to have one. Because plenty of experts do. And why rob them of their expert air-time?

Applying makeup. I realised whilst getting ready for a rare black tie affair recently that I still apply makeup the way I first learnt for my year ten graduation ball—the combined tutoring of my big sister and studying Dolly Magazine in the eighties. My understanding is some kind of moisturiser followed by base foundation, black eyeliner on the top lid, mascara only on the top eyelashes, and some red lipstick, preferably borrowed from your best friend. I’m sorry, is there more? Eyeshadow and blush just seems a bit hectic, what with the colour graduations and all. The fear of it all going wrong and me ending up looking like a drag queen keeps my minimal application at bay. I admire the deftness of others who manage to turn their face into art, and I happily leave the expertise to them.
Gallery based exhibitions. The term artist has a rich contested history that I often like to get my hands dirty with. As a class of labour, and as homogenous term that embraces an antagonistic spectrum of practices and processes, I find the term artist, like community, to be one of the more interesting, slippery and contested notions of our contemporary world. But as an arts worker with training in theatre and performance, I am particularly adamant about staying within the disciplinary boundaries of theatre, even whilst I mostly hang out within the discursive and informal spaces of the visual arts world and venture frequently into their exhibition spaces.

Dealing with art exhibitions, I like to distinguish myself by taking a critical position on the use of space and the audience interaction with works in a white cube. I am fascinated by the spatial relations that relate to the production of art work and its consumption by an audience or viewer in its location. The context of a white cube gallery however sets a clear limit to my interest or desire to know much about how this relationship plays out, in a practical sense. Working on a larger project, bits of which end up in a gallery space, I am happy to leave the experts in the collaboration with visual arts exhibition experience to determine the interplay, narrative setting, and manufacture of works in that space. I remain, once again, your wilfully ignorant collaborator.

Changing a flat tyre. I did the workshop in bike tyre changing. I listened intently to the bike mechanic—he was cute. I bought the spare inner tube, and the portable tool kit for changing the tyre on the road. I have suffered approximately 25 flat tyres thus far. And I take my flat tyre to a bike mechanic. Every. Single. Time.

I remain, stubbornly, and eternally,

yours,

Wilfully Ignorant.

Rebecca Conroy is an interdisciplinary creature working across site, performance and community as conductor, devisor, writer and practice based researcher. She is currently conductor on Yurt Empire, a rogue housing project and site specific encounter. www.yurtempire.com
God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot
change,

The courage to change the
things I can,

And wisdom to know the
difference.

'Serenity Prayer' of the Twelve-Step-Process
Privilege (bowls)

BRIAN FUATA

A re-enactment of a performance that took place on Saturday 17th November 2012 at 4pm, 55 Sydenham Rd, Marrickville, 2204. In blue italics is the spoken text.
The room is a small room; it takes place before a bay window-looking window.

Ladies and Gentlemen, are we all in? If we could stand around the edges of the rug, maybe even close to the wall, keep in mind the camera recording this.

Welcome to Privilege (bowls) curated by Eleanor Weber as part of Reality Considerations (for the sake of).

Now, as I begin you’re probably wondering why I am dressed like a faun. Well that’s because today I am. This is what a faun looks like.

Black rollers, a pair of dark blue chinos, the waistband of red pinstriped boxer shorts, bare-chested and a nose painted black. The “bowls” are solid balls of unfired clay.

Today I am talking about these bowls I have made, which in your mind, under the guidance of what you believe as useful and valuable are not bowls. And as Brian Fuata these aren’t.

But, as a faun, they are.

As a faun, today will be a presentation, a folk artist talk about my bowls, where back in Faun Land these are bowls. These are containers of emotions and ideas.

I will validate them each with their creation stories, educate you about the contents of what they hold, followed by a ceremonial welcome faun dance. This dance will create a protective barrier to stop its physical disintegration.

I’ll start with this. With this bowl here, I was thinking of your mountains in Scandinavia, these Alps during a storm. You can see with this bowl that I was thinking of lots of turmoil; lots of dangers; lots of indecision. I’ll show this around so you all can see.

Now with this bowl I was thinking about smallness.

Now with this bowl I was thinking about infinity. You can see that it has no bottom and that the bowl itself is also contained in another bowl, otherwise known as a box.

Now with this bowl I was thinking about pleasure.

Momentarily looks out the window.
I can see Shane Haseman outside.

There’s going to be a knock at the door very soon. I can hear him walking up the stairs.

Shane enters.

Come in Shane, I saw you coming into the building downstairs, outside. Take a place. I’ve just finished explaining these bowls that I’ve made. They belong to a mystical, mythological world of Faun Land. You’ve come at a time where I’m about to explain my last bowl.

This bowl is about nothingness. It is about learning nothingness, knowing nothingness, or at least an attempt to anyway.

Okay, now. A moment’s silence. Ladies and Gentlemen, the ceremonial faun dance.

Brian Fuata is a poet and performance artist working with text, narrative and improvisation. He exhibits performances in galleries, theatres and online/sms text.
EPISSDUMBOLOGAY:
A CRITEK OF KUNTS CRITEK
OF POORE RAISON IN
SOSIATY SOSAITY SOSIATEY
SOCIITY.

NCIK SNU
"Oi,

I dnt no much but I rekn I do no wun thing and thas I aint no fuckin faggitz lik sum of these kuntz I tierd to read for this thing I is riting rite now.

Lik I red on wikipaedo abutt this one kunt called Kunt, who rote sum biggest lod of bulshit book calld Critik of pooper raison or sum shit and I coodnt lik mak heds or tails of it and I thaut it was fucken shit ay.

There wernt even any picchurs of nekid bitches in it or carz getting smasht up so like who givs a fuk?

I jus go t fukin bord ay and startd thinkn bout sum hot bithces. I dunno why I gess I was just bord from readn that broing shit.

Lik if Vin Deisel in the Fast anda furous 6 eva stoppt to thenk abot this shit hed lik neva get to fuck any chix or drive fuckin cool kickass cars off helicoptas into other cars. Nah boy, hed sit in da corna reedin boks an the movie wood suk ay.

---------

Lik wot the fuck duz this kunt Kunt no about whether or not he nos shit anyway?

Lik who givs a toss?

All this shit about noing stuff befor or aftalike it was fuckn mega compil cumpli cuumploo cuumpoolkaedakatesdead and maed my Iis fuckn water ay?

It maed me want to drink beer till I coodnt rember if i hit my missyous last nite at the driv thru.

Like I no wot I no coz like I just do ok?

Ido no wun thing nad thts I rekn he wuza fagot who carnt get laid ay.

I bet I no more shit about shit than Kunt coz I no wun thing he didnt and that’s that kunt Kuntz a kunt.

Threfore I no more than that kunt.
Case bloody closed, beers on me boys.

---------

32.
Him jus hav big bag of big wurds him reach in3 an pull outa big word and everyone is like oh wow I dunno what hes tlking about so he must be fuckin awesum!!! Anden dey all go and suk his ded dik

inda end all them big wurds in dat big wurd bag all spell the saem wurd-

’POOFTA’

--------

Wurds ar gay.

I dont ned many wurds

Coz you no I just point at sumthin inna shop and grunt.

’Urrrghhh!’

’EEUUrrrghhh!’

and I be ponting at wot I want, and dey givit to me the end.

wurds are turds coz dey r shit and stink lik shit

Wich reminds me I need to go potty to do a shit

--------

Okay I just dun a bigy. It stank bad.

Where was I?

Oh yeah. Wurds are fuckin gay

Ths is most wroting I eva hav dun.

I yoosally fuckn just do shit

----------


Like sum kunt sad 'Ignoranec is blis'
But liuke I thought about it and I was like duz that mean wen u go to heaven its full of spastix?
Duz that meen that you turn into a spaz wen u go into heaven too?

---------

Then I read sum other dick called doesfarthes or something who sed lik sum famus shit an got famus off it . he wa s all liik 'I tihnk so I am’ or sumthn.
yeh no shit kunt.

Way to point out the fuckn obvious dickflop.

---------

I wuz on gogle and it sez we got sum otha name in sum poofta language 'Homo spaien' WTF???
And I was lik iz this cumpooder callen me a poofta?
Turns out that homo sapien meens like 'wise ap' or sum shit.
Like wot the fuk man.
We aint wise aps

Nah boy, we is all Dum Kunts, and sum are less dumkunts than others I reckn...

I dunno.

Fukit.'

---------

Ncik Snu iz othawhizz cald 'Nick Sun' an duz standop cumedie and iz gud riter to www.nicksun.com

34.
ÉTUDE QUOTIDIENNE 1

MEGAN GARRETT-JONES

What did you learn at school today? My father asked me.
I learned that I have to work hard to be understood, I answered.

I don’t understand, replied my father and I got frustrated.
I always have to explain myself, I explained, I can’t assume that others know
where I am coming from.

Did your teacher teach you that? My father queried.
Not entirely, I replied.

What did your teacher teach you? My father now asked.
That I can’t be taught entirely by one teacher, I began to answer.

Of course not, my father agreed, there are your parents, and books.
And that teachers do not teach per say, I decided to continue, but only lead.

To which my father said, let me teach you a few things I have learned.

I have learned the pleasure of leaving the house in pyjamas, of sitting on a
park bench in slippers. I have learned to put a dollar in a jar everyday instead
of having a cigarette. I have learned not to chastise myself for my erratic
thinking or the disparities between my ideal self and my perceived self.

He paused.

I have learned, he began, but drifted back into the pause as if it was the pause
that had been interrupted by his words and not the other way around, and the
pause was now asserting its rightful duration in the conversation.

I waited.

My dad picked absently at the skin around his fingernails that peeled. It looked
sore, I thought.

Then I said, You have not taught me these things.

Meg Garrett-Jones is interested in using performance and writing to frame the everyday as a
site of transformation and creative agency. This contribution was a detour from her Masters in
Performance and Creative Research at Roehampton University (London).
The Ignorant Schoolmaster
Pro Leans to Intellectual Ignorance

Jacques Baréty
Translated and with an introduction by Kevin Ray
A Bigger Book of Ignorance

38.
EXERCISE

Take any random item out of your pocket or bag, or from your household.

This exercise involves trying to explain everything that you know about this object.

• Why is it here?
• What function does it serve?
• Who invented it?
• How did the invention get to this continent?
• What is it made from?
• Who manufactured it?
• Why did they manufacture this object instead of anything else they might have manufactured?
• Why did they become manufacturers in the first place, instead of anything else they might have become?
• Why did you buy it? / How did you acquire it? / How much does it cost? / How much is it worth?

Repeat this exercise daily.
I confess, I don’t know how to use a lighter to light the stove without getting burnt. Or how to network (which is not good for a freelancer), or how to download torrent files or successfully write an online dating profile. But I feel like my greatest ignorance is that I don’t know what the world sees when they see me. The gap between who I think I am and who I am in the world could be vast, or minimal. What’s actually floating around in that gap is a mystery to me; it’s ‘what I don’t know I don’t know’.

Is it possible not to be ignorant of that delicate space between me and everyone else? Sometimes I get a glimpse, the looming shape of what I don’t know about someone, without exactly knowing what’s there. I remain ignorant, but can feel the swirling deficit, the unanswered questions and the mental guesswork in the gap between a beautiful face and my fear of rejection, or between the words being spoken and a story-less void.

My ignorance has a long and varied history. Waiting to be kissed for the first time, on the lap of a freckled sharpie with steel-wool hair in a dingy community hall, I didn’t know how quickly it might happen, so I kept my mouth slightly ajar (for quite a while) to avoid the embarrassment of being caught with my lips shut. It was risk management in the face of ignorance waiting to happen.

Until a couple of years ago, I had no idea (though I would have claimed I did) that your life could change in an instant. Really change, almost irreparably. Stripping away your ignorance – which is really your innocence. And although it’s technically impossible to actually “know what you don’t know”, I feel like in that moment when something terrible is happening – a betrayal, a death, or a threat to your own life – you experience the shock of seeing yourself in your ignorance, right as you’re losing it.

I thought of asking five friends to tell me what they think “I don’t know I don’t know”. And quickly realised that’s a scary thought, so I chickened out. My friend PJ told me about a little chart that his philosopher Dad once told him about. It reminded me in a weird way of Donald Rumsfeld’s “known knowns, known unknowns, and unknown unknowns”. The square of “what you don’t know you don’t know” is your blind spot. My friend said, reassuringly, that what you think would be mortifying, ie the exposure of your own blind spot, is actually not that bad to the person who sees it.
I hate not knowing things, specially the things I can’t look up in a book. But maybe I’m defined by my ignorance as much as by what I know; and maybe if it weren’t for ignorance, adventures couldn’t happen. I confess, until I was about 35 I thought that ‘misled’ was pronounced like the past tense of ‘misle’. I never have any clue what the impact of changes to government arts policy might be, and am often unsure of correct meeting protocol. I don’t know my height in centimeters. I didn’t know that some fire-escape doors can’t be opened from the inside until I wandered away from a film shoot on the 54th floor of a skyscraper on a Sunday morning to check out whether I could see all the way down the stairwell to ground level – and got locked in. It was a great view.

From: Emma Beech <beech1380@yahoo.com.au>
Subject: Re: A Little Book of Ignorance
Date: 9 July 2013 5:35:10 PM AEST
To: Malcolm Whittaker <malcolm.whittaker@gmail.com>

My story of ignorance began as a child when I didn’t know why I had been born to my parents, or if in fact they were my parents at all, after being told by my brothers and sisters that I was found in a bin under a pile of fish and chips and poo, all wrapped in newspaper.

Then, at catholic primary school, after a school church service, I asked my infinitely grown up and wise 12-year old sister if she thought God really existed? Because I had started to have my doubts. She whispered to me, urgently, fearfully, “I don’t know either.”
I remember being at the edge of puberty, as tiny breasts started to grow, I said to my dad one day, almost in tears, that I didn’t want to be a woman. I wanted to stay being a little girl. I could see the writing on the wall, and could sense that childhood ignorance was indeed bliss. Dad rubbed my shoulder, and looked at me in a way that adults do when they don’t want to tell you the truth, but that the truth is too bold to be hidden.

When I got to high school, I didn’t realise that I wasn’t cool until someone told me to my face in PE. The ways of coolness to this day have eluded me.

At University, all grown up now, my small town world of information became a universe of knowledge. And in my fear of seeming like I knew nothing, [and lets face it, I pretty much did know nothing], I pretended I knew everything, and in pretending to know everything, I didn’t learn much, except of course, how to pretend.

By the time I came into myself, I started to find out things. Like how to get a job, that’s it’s not all about me, and that people from foreign lands were in a detention centre in a town up the road. And they had stories. And they came from places I’d heard of, but really, I didn’t quite know where those places were, or what language they spoke there, or what food they ate, or what they did for fun. I learnt that people’s families really do disappear, like in the movies, only this was definitely not the movies, that people get very damaged by the places they call home, but that they continue to love and miss those homes, and that you can still laugh a lot no matter what.

And when I was watching Eurovision the other week, I couldn’t honestly say where some of the countries were on a map of the world. Like, Azerbaijan for example. I did what I do very well though, which was to pretend I did, and then looked them up the next day in quiet shame.

At 33 years of age, I can now proudly say that the more I know, the more there is to know, and so on and so on, until the end.

Someone asked me the other day, “What would you ask god, whatever you deem that to be, if you met them?”
I replied, “I would ask ‘Why are we here?’”
Because this, still, I do not know.
I’d just like to clarify; what exactly is ignorance? And are we talking about it in a derogatory way? Or just in a general, ‘you’re a bit ignorant but you’re still a good person’ kind of way?

Because the word ignorance feels judgmental. Like you could accuse somebody of it. Like you could snap at a friend who thought pumpkin was a vegetable when you really know it’s a fruit ‘Oh you’re just bloody ignorant!’ When in reality you’d both be right because botanically speaking, a pumpkin is a fruit, but culinarily speaking, it is a vegetable.

Because I don’t know that whether being ignorant, is just not knowing about something. And if you just don’t know about something, and you haven’t intentionally decided not to know about it, then are you ignorant of it? It’s like if a tree fell in a forest, and nobody knew it was there, is it your fault that you didn’t know that it fell down?

What about not being interested in something because you just don’t find it interesting- is that ignorance? Is ignorance a deliberate choice not to learn about something because you find it boring? And are you supposed to be knowledgable about boring things just to prevent you from being called ignorant by some smug person who happens to know who the current Prime Minister of England is?

Because you can’t possibly know about everything in the world. So inevitably you’re going to be ignorant about a lot of things. And it’s not your fault. It’s not anybody’s fault. It’s just that there are too many things to know about in the world- despite the internet and google and blogs and Facebook and YouTube and everything that tells us to know about everything all the time.

In the end, we just can’t know it all. And that’s OK.

To demonstrate these points I’ve made some lists:

**THINGS I’M IGNORANT OF:**

Basic geography  
Hit songs until everyone else is sick of them  
World politics  
National politics
Local politics
How to have a long term relationship
How to fall in love with people who will love you back

THINGS I JUST DON’T KNOW ABOUT- ALTHOUGH NOT IN A MALICIOUS OR DELIBERATE WAY AND NOT THROUGH LACK OF TRYING:

Basic geography
Hit songs until everyone else is sick of them
World politics
National politics
Local politics
How to have a long term relationship
How to fall in love with people who will love you back

From: lina Kastoumis <linakastoumis@gmail.com>
Subject: Ignorance stuff
Date: 9 July 2013 9:45:06 PM AEST
To: Malcolm Whittaker <malcolm.whittaker@gmail.com>

21 years in captivity
Are you so blind that you cannot see?
Are you so deaf that you cannot hear?
Are you so dumb that you cannot speak? I say

Free Nelson Mandela
Free Nelson Mandela
Free Nelson Mandela

when i was young, we didn’t have the internet.
we had actual friends, magazines, books, libraries, gossip, television, the cinema [sometimes] and always, music.
we shared and somatically responded to music in public places on a regular basis.
we did this thing called ”dancing”.

one night
i was a teenager, i can’t remember where.
this was before drugs, before alcohol, before girly womanhood and mating rituals –
when music was enough, if not everything.
so some 80’s funk anthem ends and
i hear this rousing acapella intro of what would soon become a brassy and infectious ska song.

i didn’t know what the fuck they were singing -
didn’t catch the words at the first or second chorus
but I could not get off that dance floor till the song faded out.

it accused me of being blind, deaf and dumb
because I didn’t know who
nel-son man-deeeeeef--------la was.
but I wasn’t insulted - for real.

so i got this song and its title in my head, i ask (the dj perhaps? or a friend who read expensive UK mags
and was cooler than me)
and the next day i keep asking and start reading -
beginning at home with our biased and very laughable (yes i knew this as a child) world book encyclopaedia
that was printed for the masses in 1973
because we didn’t have the internet – and the tv and newspapers didn’t say shit.

so I get out and buy the single, memorise the lyrics and i keep asking and soon
i know that there’s this thing called apartheid and there’s this black dude, in
prison, in this country called south africa. right now.

when art dispels ignorance there is a tempered ferocity
yet grace, in its telling.
don’t curse your stupidity
don’t stroke your aspiring ego by thinking ‘I could have done/said/thought of that’
don’t hate yourself for not producing the very thing that you are now consuming.
don’t be jealous – no regrets
but don’t hoard it either – it’s not yours to own.
just enjoy the brain-fuck realisation
that things will never be the same, again
and you know this now.

and maybe epiphany is the opposite of ignorance.
My name is Nathan and I don’t know what to do at parties.

I don’t drink (or smoke), so the first thing I find is that I don’t know what to do with my hands. I end up in conversations with people who have drinks and cigarettes to manage, feeling self-conscious about not doing anything. It’s not so bad if I can find something to lean on, but that’s not always possible.

Nine times out of ten, I’m not interested in dancing, I’m there to catch up with friends. So when the music invariably becomes too loud for conversation, I feel like leaving just to get some quiet. This usually leaves my loitering around the front of the party making small talk to people I don’t know, or checking my phone.

As people get more inebriated, I usually feel very separated from the party. I enjoy being stupid with friends, but I have a kind of subconscious disconnect when people are drunk and I find it hard to have fun with them. I don’t mean that as a smug or superior thing, I really don’t. A lot of the time I end up watching stuff from the side and making comments to people. More than once I’ve found myself making Jim-from-The-Office faces to invisible cameras.

It’s also incredibly tiresome that as the night goes on conversations become more and more centred around the fact I’m not drinking and not looking like I’m having fun. I guess I don’t know how to look like I’m having fun.

I used to have fun at parties, I’m sure of it. But parties seem to have changed and it makes me feel like a grandpa. I want to spend time with friends, but it never really works out that way. I get there, I talk to a few people, and pretty soon I want to go home because I’d rather be in bed with a book.
“Decir que usted no sabe y aprender todo lo”

Spanish adage from Louis CK for ‘Say that you don’t know and you learn everything’
ÉTUDE QUOTIDIENNE 2
(TO LEARN WITHOUT THE INTERNET)

MEGAN GARRETT-JONES

03.06.13. Verdi: As he lay on his deathbed in 1901, the people of Milan lay straw on the streets so the Maestro could die in peace.
- Augusto Corrieri performance artist and writer after W.G Sefold’s ‘Monuments Musicaux’

4.06.13. Howard: The family name of the Dukes of Norfolk, in the 15th Century and still today.
- Taymaz Azimi, student of philosophy (6 years) student of theology (2 years)

05.06.13. Something sweet: Tesco Donuts + Hot Custard = Not good.
- Andrea Vinci, beverage contractor and manager at The Merchant

06.06.13. Purpose: It is nice to think that everything happens for a reason.
- G.G Malone, twin, bar worker and aspiring hairdresser

- Guy on a bike in Tooting
08.06.13. Spirulina: So good for energy levels.  
- Ashlyn, New Zealander working in a café in Clapham

09.06.13. Perspective: Don’t only look at anything from one angle.  
- Fillippo, PHD in economics and falsely accused

10.06.13. Style: Being an asshole is one style. Like chaotic mess is a style of cooking.  
- Tara Fatehi Irani, M.A. student in Performance and Creative Research

11.06.13. Diesel: Isn’t petrol. It can come from oil but it isn’t petroleum. It was invented to be naturally derived, so farmers could produce it from their crops.  
- Richard, has owned a lot of cars and done a lot of driving.

- Amy Wilson, traveller

13.06.13. Place: Michigan, It’s in the United States, near Canada.  
- Guy in front of the Paris Metro map,

14.06.13. Consistency: Cheese is a paste.  
- Airport security woman

15.06.13. Politics: Go to Tehran tomorrow. It is the best week there in the last four years.  
- Pouya Ehsaei, Iranian, PHD student in electronic music

16.06.13. Time: You can’t study if you’re at work all the time.  
- Australian guy at the pub

17.06.13. Teaching: An example of bad teaching is to put your name and qualifications on the first slide of every lesson, I had one like that. It was a lot of talking and not much sense. With corporate governance you really need to know what you’re talking about.  
- Lydia Nakonechnaya, Ma Finance, London intern.

18.06.13. Biology: Bi cornuate – a condition in which the fallopian tubes are split in two.  
- Chris, neurosurgeon.
19.06.13. Ethnicity: The Rock is Samoan. Well his mother is Samoan and his father is Black.
- Aisha, Born in Grenada, lives in London.

20.06.13. Distance: Edinburgh is about six hours from London on the train.
- Emily, from Aberdeen, works in London pub.

21.06.13. Balance: To ride with no hands, gradually take your hands off the handlebars, then go for it. I find it easier in a higher gear.
- Bendy, London cyclist

22.06.13. Skittles: IS a game like bowling, as in the players were like skittles in front of the goalmouth off the corner kick. See also domino.
- Stopper, regular at the pub, drumming workshops teacher

23.06.13. Wastage: No one goes into a café to buy salad on a Sunday.
- Jen, New Zealander working in a café in Clapham.

24.06.13. Bebidas: Drink whites in Galicia. Abariño is the best.
- Juan, Galician taxi driver

25.06.13. From the road: Fisterra, or Finisterre – the end of the world to the Romans, the end of the Camino trail to others. Walking 900 km changes some things in your head.
- Johnny and Wim, Bad Pilgrims.

26.06.13. Wear and tear: A scratch 550 mm long is usual wear and tear. You don’t have to worry about it.
- Europcar salesperson.

27.06.13. Good life: Finish work at two p.m. and ride a bike with your dogs to the beach.
- Friendly dude in Cedeira
It's nice to think that everything happens for a reason.

With the compliments of...

Gigi Milone

06.06.13
EXERCISE

Review the fact presented on page twenty-three of this *Little Book of Ignorance*.

Based on your own understanding, attempt to adequately disprove this fact to someone you do not know.

Ask this individual to do the same and disprove this fact, in their own way, back to you.
EVERYTHING INSIDE THIS BOX IS TRUE

EVERYTHING INSIDE THIS BOX IS FALSE
EXERCISE

Through Quantum Mechanics, Erwin Schrödinger (however incomprehensibly) explains a paradox of common sense. That when you do not know something for sure then all possibilities exist side-by-side.

What’s in the box opposite?

• a living cat
• a dead cat
• 12 very silently scurrying mice
• the man upon the stair
• …………………………………………………………………………………………………………
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HOW WAS I SUPPOSED TO KNOW?

GEORGIE MEAGHER

Thinking 5 ways

#1
On Saturday afternoon, in a nook I often walk by, a man was lying down on his side. Facing away from me, I could only see that he was older, white-haired and wearing a sweater and pants with dirt marks across the back. I noticed him out of the corner of my eye and I slowed my pace to determine if he had decided to take a nap in that spot or if he’d fallen over and needed assistance. This spot was often host to male street drinkers, and it wouldn’t have been the first time someone was napping in that spot. Despite a small pot being knocked over near his feet, I kept walking, trying not to notice enough detail to feel responsible. I could make up my own story and didn’t have to know any better. A young man, looking alarmed and walking briskly from the other direction, caught my eye and gesturing to his forehead, said “he’s bleeding”. He sat on a nearby bench while my friend called an ambulance then he left, mumbling an apology and saying he was late for work.

#2
I find my fascination with psychics quite strange. I love that in New York they are nearly on every corner. But when I was there, despite a strong dose of cynicism and a growing obsession with these sites, the possibility of seeing into the future terrified me, and I could never bear to step inside one. It felt less of a risk to not know. Imagine knowing something life changing but not believing you knew? Or trusting and being fooled?

Then, standing on Wall Street, I was fantasising about that other life I might have pursued as an economist. I wanted the heart of an industry based on confidence, strategic guesswork and trading of futures to bear as much resemblance to Tina’s Psychic Meditation Boutique in life as it did in my mind. I found myself pacing up and down, outside the austere facades, trying to understand, even feel, the real essence of the financial centre of the world. Whether it was some foreboding secret society type thing or the pure energy of ego-fuelled self-belief – it might validate my own vibe-theory of correlation. Perhaps it pulsed behind the elevator doors, in a 73rd floor boardroom or in a banker’s bag of cocaine, but it certainly wasn’t anywhere I could find.
#3
I have an idea for an invention that is going to make me super rich. It’s an analog start-up that utilises the conceptual consciousness of the internet to create a ruptured anti-network of non-information where there is only an absence of data and nothing to hold it together. Based on an unproven theorem of non-intelligent design – obsolescence and inaccuracy are key axes on which the system operates. Underperformance is standard. The machine produces and reproduces itself, but fails because it has no memory. The system is thus in a constant and futile process of growth which inevitably is stunted by it’s purposeful inadequacy, reducing it’s size constantly but never disappearing. Research indicates there is a real market gap in this area and the possibilities for cross-platform integration are strong. I’m currently seeking investors. Contact georgi.meagher@gmail.com for a full business plan.

#4
Is it our responsibility to discover new things, new ideas, new knowledge? Last Friday, someone leading a class suggested we should try and ask the questions that Google can’t answer. Perhaps this is our responsibility. Perhaps this is the radical act that will lead to change. And, after all, it is the things beyond our wildest imaginations that are the best things to imagine.

I was inspired – let’s find the unanswerable things. They are the ones that will force us to speculate.

#5
Learning from http://game.urpartner.com/magic8ball/

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Will my business fail</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will I be rich soon</td>
<td>It is certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in future wat i will become</td>
<td>It is certain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WILL I FIND EMPLOYMENT</td>
<td>My reply is no</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do you lie?</td>
<td>Ask again later</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>do u know who i like</td>
<td>Better not tell you now</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will I get to travel the world</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will I grow old?</td>
<td>Concentrate and ask again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will I wake up in the morning?</td>
<td>Outlook not so good</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>will i win ?</td>
<td>It is decidedly so</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>am i pregnant this month</td>
<td>As I see it, yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Georgie Meagher is an artist, curator and writer based in Sydney.
Lucy Parakhina. Mt Wellington, Tasmania, 5:05pm - 23rd June 2013.
In “A Field Guide to Getting Lost”, Rebecca Solnit writes about the dreamlike blue hue of distance as a metaphor for our attraction to and desire of the unknown:

“We treat desire as a problem to be solved, address what desire is for and focus on that something and how to acquire it rather than on the nature and the sensation of desire, though often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing. I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed? For something of this longing will, like the blue of distance, only be relocated, not assuaged, by acquisition and arrival, just as the mountains cease to be blue when you arrive among them and the blue instead tints the next beyond. Somewhere in this is the mystery of why tragedies are more beautiful than comedies and why we take a huge pleasure in the sadness of certain songs and stories. Something is always far away.”

Perhaps we can learn to accept our ignorance - of ourselves, of the inner worlds of others, of news topics and scientific concepts, anything - in the same way. Not think of those gaps in knowledge as negatives that need to be filled in.

Lucy Parakhina is a photographer from Sydney. She really likes driving down dark country roads by herself.
# GLOSSARY OF TERMINOLOGY

- **AGENCY**: one’s personal capacities for choices, actions and participation in the world around them
- **EMANCIPATION**: to set free - especially from legal, social or political restrictions
- **ETUDE**: an exercise to improve one’s technique or demonstrate one’s skill
- **EVERYTHING**: all that exists and the opposite of nothing
- **HELIOCENTRISM**: the astronomical model in which the Earth and planets revolve around a relatively stationary Sun at the center of the Solar System
• KNOWLEDGE: information created, edited and orchestrated by your brain in the belief that it holds an absolute truth

• MONEY: bio-survival units necessary for living and earned through capitalist endeavours.

• NARCISSISM: excessive self-interest and focus

• PEDAGOGY: the science of education

• QUOTIDIAN: ordinary or everyday

• SCARED: to be caused great fear or nervousness by a specific external stimulus which contains a perceived threat

• SMILE: a facial expression formed by flexing the muscles near both ends of the mouth as a means of communication, usually pleasure or happiness - but can be artificial as well as sincere.

• SPECIES: one of the basic units of biological classification and a terrible science fiction film enjoyed by pubescent teenage boys.

• ZOMBIE: an animated corpse or undead being bereft of consciousness, self-awareness and the basic capacities of thinking and only able to respond to close surrounding stimuli.

(Define further terminology which you encounter in the Little Book of Ignorance and do not readily understand)