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Artists talk: Listen to the imagination

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Abstract

How does the imagination work? How do artists working in different forms move from the very beginning of an idea to something they are ready to share with the world? How do artists - even the most experienced - contend with the possibility of failure? And, how do we develop a robust reflective and creative practice in our creative writing programs? This article doesn't pretend to answer these questions explicitly, rather, in its own elliptical style, it explores the possibilities of creation, how to express the inexpressible, how to share the most nascent of ideas. It introduces the reader to the Artists Talk program that has been developed successfully at the University of Canberra as a model of practice.

Keywords

listen, imagination, artists, talk

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Rendle-Short, F. "Artists talk: Listen to the imagination." TEXT 11.2 (2007)

The University of Canberra

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Artists Talk: listen to the imagination

Abstract

How does the imagination work? How do artists working in different forms move from the very beginning of an idea to something they are ready to share with the world? How do artists - even the most experienced - contend with the possibility of failure? And, how do we develop a robust reflective and creative practice in our creative writing programs? This article doesn't pretend to answer these questions explicitly, rather, in its own elliptical style, it explores the possibilities of creation, how to express the inexpressible, how to share the most nascent of ideas. It introduces the reader to the Artists Talk program that has been developed successfully at the University of Canberra as a model of practice.

To create anything you have to believe in failure.

Malcolm McLaren talking to Andrew Denton on *Enough Rope*, 2006

Alchemy = a miraculous transformation [1]

It is such a simple idea, and it began simply enough too.

I wanted a dedicated space in the middle of a working week, an academic/teaching/ writing/ assessing/ meeting/ moderating/ answering-email/ *andphonecall* week - and aren't we all juggling a million cats, as Jen Webb puts it (Webb 2004)? - where I could rest and dream *and dream and rest* and be nurtured and think to let go. Wander. And wonder.

I wanted to give my imagination the chance to roam freely, meditatively. Eavesdrop into the working ways of other artists. Hear them tick. I wanted to know what troubles them, what sets them back, what pushes them forwards, onwards, upwards, how they *make this whole thing work*, how they create/ build/ sustain their own cathedral of *indistinctness* (to borrow a term from John Carey): 'We are given one or two details - fiery eyes, phosphorescence. But we have to invent the rest.' [2]

I wanted to experience pleasure.

Alchemy.

Alchemy = a miraculous transformation or the means of achieving this

Here then, the simple idea.

I reckoned if we could invite some practising artists working in all manner of artforms to come and converse with us at university over the course of a semester, midweek every Wednesday fortnight for a lunchtime hour (dot to dot) - and include our practising-artist colleagues in writing and media too to hear what they are doing - and have each of the artists talk about their own particular imaginative processes, and for all of us *to be engaged*, uplifted, then the idea was worth floating, experimenting with, worth *doing*. Make it informal enough. Allow it to be idiosyncratic. Open up the conversation to the public, to all academic staff in the School and students in our programs and other academics and interested visitors from around the campus, as well as visitors from the wider community who might care about these things too - to listen in. That it would work.

It does.

That we would want more.

We do.

*Alchemy = the possible transmutation of all
matter*

The Artists Talk program is now a fixture in the School of Creative Communication semester calendar. It has been stitched formally into the creative honours program, where students are expected to attend like any other artist, researcher or visitor would. Since July 2004 we have had some 36 artists, 'conversationalists' including dancers and choreographers, scriptwriters, theatre practitioners, dramaturgs, visual artists, filmmakers, poets, cartoonists, video artists, film producers, photographers, new media artists, creative writers, editors and curators. The formula is practical and strategic. Each semester six artists are invited to talk, three from outside the university who are paid an honorarium and three from inside. There are no rules or guidelines as to what is to be said or how. The experience of the hour altogether is the important thing. For the artist, and audience.

I/ we would be bereft now without them.

*Very surprising to hear how similar are the stories told by
artists from across the spectrum of practice forms. [3]*

This is a story then of some $3455 + 310 = 3765$ words including the title, references, endnotes, everything (and I'm only adding up the words as another way of describing this particular, and peculiar, cathedral of the imagination for the screen), about this lunchtime conversation series dedicated to creative practice in all forms and sizes, to giving space to the imagination *at work*: storytelling by practising artists. Just like the dedication of glassmakers working to shape and twist and bend and prod and roll molten glass in an alchemical meditation, literally in front of a roaring furnace, dripping with sweat and all, in these talks artists of all flavours, compositions and persuasions demonstrate

their 'toil', the intricacies - the curve and tease - of their particular practice.

Quartz powder, seaweed ash, manganese - the fire would transform it all, release its components, separate out and then reunite them. More fires. More heat inside and outside the glasshouse. But the men did not complain. Without the fire there would be no mystery, no glass, no distillation. (Stott 2007: 69-70)

I have wanted to write about our Artists Talk program for some time, but haven't known how to approach the subject matter. Then along came my turn for PDR - one of the many juggled cats - the annual Performance Development Review with the Head of School (has a full year really gone by already?). In the conversation, amongst other things I was reminded of a promise made this time last year, an ambition to write a piece of writing about these artists talks (did I say that?). Not that I don't think they are a very great thing. It's more about finding the time, contemplation - the pull, the hook - to write of this joy. In any case, *the slow search with words* as a means to express this experience of indeterminacy.

It is the slow search with words for the point where consciousness and understanding intersect with unconsciousness and confusion; a search for some sort of threshold between knowing and not knowing. (Bird 1996: 308)

The very next weekend I visited the new Canberra Glassworks.

It was a Sunday and I began the day in bed, reading. A beautiful Sunday too. Crisp, a clear morning, the sky is blue, and a set of boomfy clouds drifts slowly east towards the south coast. Framed by the rectangular window of bedroom glass a chorus line of soft pink galahs jitterbug outside on a pair of electrical wires, while my cat Adagio (that's her short name) purrs in a circle on the bed, and this is heaven I tell myself, reading. I call this rapture, when everything about you, everything before and after that very moment of the *now* expands and contracts, twirls, loops the loop, voyages out and whistles you back, in and out and round and about in spirals, to make curlicues and crenellations - gargoyles with tongues hanging out.

I am in bed reading a book called *How to look at a painting*. It's intriguing.

The minute I sat in front of a canvas I was happy. Because it was a world, and I could do what I liked with it, says Alice Neel. (Paton 2006: 8)

I don't know yet what the day holds, exactly. Don't yet know how any indistinctness - *some sort of threshold between knowing and not knowing* - will secrete its juice into my heart.

I read this book in one sitting - or should that be *lie-ing*? - and it's a good book too to be reading like this because I've already decided to make this Sunday an R-n-R day, a day of recuperation, a day packed full of art. I want to be nurtured. I want to float. I want *an experience*. To swell with my own reckoning - whole body. So here's the plan: after I get up, get dressed, it will be first the Canberra Glassworks on the Kingston foreshore in the renovated powerhouse on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin - an industrial cathedral, it's been said - open to the public for the first time. Then after a light Ethiopian-samosa lunch at the Old Depot Markets next door, I'll listen to a floor talk to be given at the National Portrait Gallery up the road in Old Parliament House by curator Helen Ennis, a talk about her extraordinary new exhibition *Reveries: Photography and mortality*. To finish off, I will visit Canberra Contemporary Art Space in Manuka, have a piece of ginger cake and conversation with the artist Marina Neilson about her wall-work on show in *The dot, the hole and the puncture* and, even though I didn't know this as I set out, I will purchase one of her rubbings, unframed, to take home.

'Let things grow,' says fiction writer and poet, Adrian Caesar.
[4]

The book of words I am reading, *How to look at a painting*, is by renowned New Zealand art writer Justin Paton. I've not heard of him before, but oh, how beautifully he writes, seamlessly, his words a river of spun glass. Witty too. Reading like this is to be transformed/ transported/ transmogrified (no, that's too religious!) into a cathedral of your own imaginative making (not that I'm somebody who likes to worship in a cathedral on a Sunday). As Paton reminds us, 'the trade routes that matter' are always going to be those of the imagination (Paton 2006: 73).

Here we go.

I don't know about you, but when I speak of the imagination to other people in conversation, sometimes in more formal dialogue too, I stretch out my arms both ways, gesticulate away from my body gesturing upwards, outwards, onwards, as if reaching up to touch the sky. There's a sense I have with this motion, that the imagination inhabits a space away *up there - a w a y*. And the opposite too in a gesture towards the body, hold my head - press my breastbone - as if any 'imagination' has its songline to this heart-and-lung shape inside.

Into the *cathedral of possibility*, slowly.

'Nothing is ever wasted,' comments curator Helen Ennis, *'you have to admit to the process.'* [5]

When it comes to welcoming the imagination, talking about it *at large*, there is no half measure - way out there or in here (can you see/ feel/ hear me pointing?). Whenever I've visited cathedrals, real cathedrals of gothic proportions especially the empty ones and those without embellishment, I feel the same way, a feeling at the one time - all at once - of *way up there and down here*, with me, *in me*, bodily.

Visiting the glassworks this morning strikes the same note. [6] The experience is industrial, to do with scale and size - the giant hoppers, the gigantic turbine, the faraway steep-pitched gable roof, the pigeons nesting in the rafters, the sound of the Welsh mining hooter-tooter that once signalled the end to a shift. And the making of electricity as it did for the whole of Canberra: the powerhouse generation. So too, the in-here-ness of the experience, the possibility of making something anew, rejuvenation, where the lights have been turned on to the making of glass, see-through-ness, to give this great display art form - one with cobwebs and spiders and heat furnaces and shiny reflective surfaces - a home. They say of it, proudly, it's a working industrial cathedral again. They say it is the first glassworks of its kind in Australia.[7]

'You can't always know what you're doing in your work until you look at them later,' says printmaker Patsy Payne, adding she often sees new things in old work. [8]

Everyone watches, waits.

There's a lot of waiting around in the glasshouse. A back-and-forth motion of heating and cooling, manipulating the shape and thickness and density of the

materials. Everyone works together as a team. There's a lot of talking about what they are doing, sizing things up, *how* they are doing it, where it's going well, what if there's a hitch as they stick and glue and fuse surfaces together. It's hot work. They sweat. They drink lots of water. They wear clear protective glasses, arm-size heatproof gloves. Watching, you see the process of objects being made *as they happen*.

This process thing of making art is perhaps something Robert Dessaix might call 'percolation': 'Pour on some bubbling water and then sit and wait to see what drips through' (Dessaix 1996). He's talking about writing of course but he could as easily be talking about the drip-drip-drip of molten glass.

Glass art is jazzy, spectacular, showy. It's like seeing through to the inside of the artistic process from the outside, on a grand scale. All the base elements are present - fire, water, air, earth (in this case, sand). Watching the euphoric performance of this open day gives me a metaphor for thinking through what the process of making is about. There are lots of synergistic syncopations with the writing of this narrative, lots of twists and bends in the process - and prods and rolls and drips. Justin Paton's book was a late birthday present from a gallery-director friend. In it there is mention of the Tate Modern in London, the site of that city's powerhouse and now a destination art gallery of industrial proportions. Up the road here in Australia, listening to Helen Ennis' floor talk (another New Zealander like Paton) takes me back to the Artists Talk she gave us last year (semester 1, 2006), and the idea of *looking at art* which brings me back to the beginning of the day and reading art in bed.

It's a privilege to look into someone else's mind - I love it. [9]

Helen Garner writes about this state in her essay entitled 'I'; she calls it a state of despair (not too strong a word, she suggests). She wonders out loud: 'I don't understand this process - how I 'do' it, or how it's done to me, or *in* me, by the demands of my story' (Garner 2002: 151). She goes on to talk about getting lost, how you can't rush this process, you can't force it. 'It's organic, instinctive.'

You can't rush Helen Ennis's show either, a show asking THE BIG question - how do we face death? It forces you to slow down, to pause awhile, perchance to weep.

Hold your breath.

Reveries: Photography and mortality is a show about death and dying, why we desire the rapture so much, where on the cusp of death there is a doubling, not an either/ or, but a coming together of two, patterns and links - light and dark, life and death, presence and absence - where two are necessary to make a whole. Ennis says what is fascinating about the collections of work from each of the artists is that the photographs can only exist and be read in a series, the individual images are connected to the rest, they *have to be* connected; you can't have one without having the lot.

What is astounding is how many connections there are. (Ennis 2007a)

Two poignant works in this exhibition for me are David Moore's *Moon writing* and Anne Ferran's *Dad passing over Wheeny Creek*. *Moon writing* is an assemblage of six black-and-white works, photographs of the moon taken just before Moore died and one of the last works he made. The lines of the moon curl and curve and knot and shape back on one another in hairpin bends. It's not quite writing, although it looks like it could be. Helen Ennis writes in the catalogue how David Moore had a lifelong fascination with the moon, how his partner doubts he ever missed a full moonrise. Ennis asks: 'is the moon itself writing or is Moore writing with the moon?' (Ennis 2007b: 28).

Anne Ferran's last portrait of her father, *Dad passing over Wheeny Creek*, is a trail of diffuse light, just that, and yet all of that - more.

How can we imagine the end of imagining, the end of the conversation with ourselves which guide us through the world?
(Clendinnen 2006: 70) [10]

When Helen Ennis gave her Artists Talk at the University of Canberra she prefaced her remarks by saying she would 'elaborate on her working processes and the roles that fascination, trust, and intimacy play in formulating a project'. [11] Appropriately, her project was then called 'Facing death'. She canvassed the delicacy of her subject matter and the uncertainty of bringing together work such as this into the public arena months in advance of her deadline, months in advance, as it happens, of her having any certainty about any of artists making their work available; there has always been an understanding, she says, that the artists could pull their work out of *Reveries* at any time. [12] What is significant about Ennis' Artists Talk was how we were welcomed so warmly into the cave of her embryonic thinking ... not after the fact but *as it was happening*.

There's honesty and integrity about it all - uncomplicated, just

the way I like it sometimes! [13]

Sometimes in these conversations you hear an artist thinking/ creating/ imagining out loud. Making bold their assertions. Testing their ideas. Whispering secrets. We hear their beating heart. See wobbly hands even from the most seasoned of academic performers. It is a remarkable experience - an experience of being present within the art itself, in the presence of artists *actually making work*. Fascination, trust and intimacy hold us tightly together.

It makes a very private thing a shared process ... better than I could possibly hope for. [14]

So - the idea works.

The desire to experience the pleasure of hearing artists talk about their work whatever the work amounts to at any particular time. The construction of a place *of being*, what might be called artistic contemplation, in the middle of the academic week in the middle of a busy, busy university schedule. Time out, time to look at/ in/ through/ *out of* art. The chance to listen in to conversations about *what is going on* outside the more formal question-and-answer of seminars and conference papers and the reading of 'finished' journal articles.

The desire to create an atmosphere of possibility, play, informality, where there is collegiality, yes, but also vulnerability.

It was also a visual slideshow of his creative process: we literally saw the desk he sat at to write the very story we were listening to ... This is a new type of fourth wall breaking. [15]

It just so happens as I write this that our School is undertaking pedagogic research on 'Improving Outcomes for Graduates in Creative Communication'. The project seeks to improve the extent to which students who graduate from the School understand and possess the University's agreed generic skills and attributes. One of the specific outcomes is a bank of tailor-made skills and attributes designed to match the profile of our writing and media graduates. This profile of seven attributes forms the foundation of our School's teaching and learning strategy and is a key resource in developing units, in the design of new assessment tasks and the explicit teaching of skills and processes, and improved assessment and feedback.

A pivotal attribute pertinent to this discussion is 'reflective practice'. Our graduates, we say, are reflective creative practitioners, who will demonstrate self-knowledge and a well-developed consciousness of their own imaginative, creative and intellectual process, and who are able to effectively communicate that process to others. Our responsibility as teachers and practitioners ourselves is to show our students *how*. The Artists Talk program is one of the best ways of modelling a robust reflective and creative practice.

How?

We are not just talking about craft, an unveiling of the technical and pragmatic thinking that goes into making any imaginative work, although that is very, very interesting too. No. This is about how *to express the inexpressible*. How to develop a language that gives voice to mystery, magic, alchemy - a miraculous transformation. How *to create heat inside and outside the glasshouse*. How to talk about miracles, happy accidents, chance, things *we don't know*, aspects that render us speechless, experiments that go wrong, the possibility of failure, *and failure itself*. This is the *slow search* for words to speak out loud. This is talk about the gestation of ideas when even the experience of these ideas is at their most nascent, embryonic, their most mutable. This is: the very idea of sharing an idea that is a threat to the harbouring of the idea in the first place. And this is all - *in first person*.

A real eye-opener. [16]

Beautiful. [17]

They seem so alive and excited by what they do which has helped me to believe in what I'm doing. [18]

Endnotes

1. All definitions of 'alchemy' are from *The Australian Oxford Dictionary*. [return to text](#)
2. This word 'indistinctness' comes from John Carey's chapter on 'Creative reading: Literature and indistinctness' in *What good are the arts?* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005: 213-248). The specific quote is on page 215 and refers to the joy of reading when a writer leaves room for the reader's imagination, leaves space 'for the reader to create', where the writer invites the reader to imagine, invent, swell with their own reckoning. Carey argues that it is this 'indistinctness' that gives literature its superiority as an art form. [return to text](#)
3. Artists Talk Evaluation, anonymous participant, August 2006 [return to text](#)
4. Artists Talk, Adrian Caesar, 23 March 2005 [return to text](#)
5. Artists Talk, Helen Ennis, 5 April 2006 [return to text](#)

6. The Canberra Glassworks was officially opened by the Chief Minister and Minister for the Arts, Jon Stanhope MLA on Friday 25 May 2007 return to text
7. See <http://www.canberraglassworks.com/> return to text
8. Artists Talk, Patsy Payne, 1 June 2005 return to text
9. Artists Talk Evaluation, Sandra Burr, August 2006 return to text
10. This piece of text forms part of Helen Ennis's exhibition and catalogue return to text
11. Artists Talk, Helen Ennis, publicity flyer, 5 April 2006 return to text
12. In the catalogue of the exhibition Helen Ennis discusses a set of photographs by New Zealand photographer Craig Potton of his late wife Beverley, and admits to being 'changed' by these photographs, 'hushed by the intensity of their emotion' (2007: 44). A few months after Beverley died, Potton said: 'I don't know if I'll ever let anybody else see them' (2007: 49). return to text
13. Artists Talk Evaluation, Paul Collis, August 2006 return to text
14. Artists Talk Evaluation, Michael Everson, August 2006 return to text
15. From 'Niki... 's blog' after Artists Talk, Nigel Featherstone, 7 March 2007, at <http://creative.canberra.edu.au/hons/?q=node/64> (accessed 22 June 2007) return to text
16. Artists Talk Evaluation, Colin Parton, August 2006 return to text
17. Artists Talk Evaluation, Paul Collis, August 2006 return to text
18. Artists Talk Evaluation, Sandra Burr, August 2006 return to text

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2007) return to text

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Vol 11 No 2 October 2007

<http://www.textjournal.com.au>

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