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Blogging as art, art as research

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Blogging as art, art as research

Abstract

Since 2003, I have used a blog to collect and publish my ideas about art and social engagement, or to write short accounts of artworks I have witnessed and participated in (Ihle 2003). What motivates me to blog in this way is the desire to leave behind an experiential document of ephemeral art practices. Conceptual art, performance art, Happenings, Fluxus events and Expanded Cinema: all these constitute important moments in avant-garde art history which I 'know' only by accessing fragmentary, in complete archival documents - photographs, videotapes, artists' statements. For artists working today, these archives make a significant contribution to our own aesthetic heritage, but - especially when one considers the emphasis supposedly placed by the original works themselves on the actual experience of 'being there' - the historical value of such scraps is rather disproportionate. Blogging is one way to make a deposit in the archive today - a deposit which might, I propose, be useful for future historians of ephemeral art.

In this chapter, I introduce briefly the development of my own method of blogging as a component of socially-engaged art practice. I argue that the particular technique of online exchange and experiential documentation which emerge through the projects I will discuss here begins to model a new form of process-based aesthetics, by creating 'a record of its own making'. For contemporary artists working in the field which has recently become known as 'relational aesthetics' (or 'dialogical' art, or 'new genre public art'), blogging offers a method for experientially documenting those particular social encounters which constitute the core of these works of art - documenting, that is, the very materiality of our own practices. This experiential documentation is able to generate a rich body of evidence, revealing new insights into difficult-to-research areas of everyday life and popular culture. Furthermore, as this chapter will explore, the intimate, embodied nature of the particular method of blogging I have developed means that it not only functions as a means of documenting experience, but also, importantly, transforms the experiences themselves - leading to a deepening of the relationship between researcher and subject matter.

Keywords

blogging, research, art

Disciplines

Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details

Ihle, L. 2014, 'Blogging as art, art as research', in E. Barrett and B. Bolt (eds), *Material Inventions - Applying Creative Arts Research*, I.B. Taurus and Co., London. pp. 38-49. 2014

BLOGGING AS ART, ART AS RESEARCH

Lucas Ihlein

Since 2003, I have used a blog to collect and publish my ideas about art and social engagement, or to write short accounts of artworks I have witnessed and participated in (Ihlein 2003). What motivates me to blog in this way is the desire to leave behind an *experiential document* of ephemeral art practices.

Conceptual art, performance art, Happenings, Fluxus events and Expanded Cinema: all these constitute important moments in avant-garde art history which I “know” only by accessing fragmentary, incomplete archival documents – photographs, videotapes, artists' statements. For artists working today, these archives make a significant contribution to our own aesthetic heritage, but - considering the emphasis supposedly placed by the original works themselves on the actual experience of “being there” - the historical value of such scraps is rather disproportionate. Blogging is one way to make a deposit in the archive *today* - a deposit which might, I propose, be useful for *future* historians of ephemeral art.

In this chapter, I introduce briefly the development of my own method of blogging as a component of socially-engaged art practice. I argue that the particular technique of online exchange and experiential documentation which emerged through the projects I will discuss here begins to model a new form of process-based aesthetics, by creating “a record of its own making”. For contemporary artists working in the field which has recently become known as “relational aesthetics” (or “dialogical” art, or “new genre public art”), blogging offers a method for experientially documenting those particular social encounters which constitute the core of these works of art – documenting, that is, the very *materiality* of our own practices. This experiential documentation is able to generate a rich body of evidence, revealing new insights into difficult-to-research areas of everyday life and popular culture. Furthermore, as this chapter will explore, the intimate, embodied nature of the particular method of blogging I have developed means that it not only functions as a means of documenting experience, but also, importantly, transforms the experiences themselves - leading to a deepening of the relationship

between researcher and subject matter.

Developing Bilateral Blogging: *Bilateral Kellerberrin* and *Bilateral Petersham*

In early 2005, when I visited Kellerberrin, a small town in Western Australia, as an invited artist in residence, I used a blog for taking brief notes from my daily life there. However, after a few weeks of reflecting online about my everyday encounters with local residents, I realised that what I was doing was not just gathering data which might be useful in the making of a future art object about my experiences. Rather, blogging had begun to intervene in the very processes of localized social engagement – contributing to a cycle of action, reflection, and discussion, documented and instrumentalized through the public sphere created by the blog itself. Blogging had become an integral part of what was, for me, a new way of *doing art*.

The blog which emerged from this two-month residency, *Bilateral Kellerberrin*, became a catalyst for developing relationships with local people in the town (Ihle 2005). I quickly became aware of the cyclic nature of my artistic process – being out in public, meeting and participating in the life of the town, and being online, writing about and reflecting upon my encounters each day. The life cycle of bilateral blogging began to look something like this:

... action → publication → dialogue → action → publication → dialogue → action ...

Readers of the blog (and its subsequent printed-book version) will be able to recognize these spiralling cycles, embedded as they are in the narrative of each daily blog entry, as well as within the comments and discussion contributed by readers.

The project was thus a tool for publically reflecting on, discussing, and intensifying the experience of everyday life – for myself and for the people I encountered. Because of the dual nature (both online and offline) of the interactions which produced *Bilateral Kellerberrin* - and due to the project's reliance on a series of social interactions moving the work of art beyond a model of solo-authorship - I came to call this particular method of art-making "bilateral blogging". Combined with the capacity of this new

method to keep a detailed record of its own social encounters (that is, to keep a record of its own *materiality*) this led me to a hunch that bilateral blogging might have something to offer to discussions around the ethics of engagement in the practice of so-called “relational” art (Ihle 2007).

Exactly one year later, I had the opportunity to test out this hunch, when I re-enacted the project within my home suburb of Petersham, Sydney. Rather than being an artist-in-residence 2000 miles from home, I became a self-appointed “artist in residence in my own neighborhood”. However, since Petersham seems to blend indiscernibly into its neighboring localities, I made a strict rule for this new project: for the two months of the residency's duration, I would not be allowed to leave my suburb boundaries.

What started out, in a small country town, as an experiment in developing a new method of socially-engaged art practice, had now become an instrument to be consciously wielded, tested and refined in the crucible of my own neighborhood. The stakes were much higher: whereas in Kellerberrin I had been a privileged visitor who would soon be gone, *Bilateral Petersham* challenged me to face the social and geographical reality of my *home* environment (Ihle 2006). Whatever happened during this “residency in my own neighborhood” had the potential to transform a set of continuing local relationships from which there would be no subsequent “escape”: no leaving, no farewell. As an art-as-research project, then, *Bilateral Petersham* played directly within the arena of “the real world” (albeit a rather small portion of it) rather than restricting its aesthetic operations to the relatively safer sphere of an art gallery context.

Bilateral Petersham was a significantly more difficult project than *Bilateral Kellerberrin*. As I reflected within the blog itself, I often struggled to see clearly what surrounded me. How, I asked myself, when embedded in all that is familiar and “normal” (as opposed to exotic and strange), could I begin to experience my local everyday environment with fresh eyes? (Ihle 2009: 22). A week after starting *Bilateral Petersham*, I wrote:

Something about the town of Kellerberrin being “different,” and “new” to my experience meant I could write with a freshness. I *felt* that freshness. The very task I set myself - to see if I could experience that freshness in my own neighborhood - is proving more difficult than I expected. Or maybe, I *did* expect this difficulty (it’s built into the project brief), but I haven’t developed a method of moving through it yet (Ihle 2009: 22)

Seeing the Everyday

According to Maurice Blanchot, the everyday is by nature a rather slippery phenomenon. The everyday, he writes, is precisely 'the inexhaustible, irrecusable, constantly unfinished [...] that always escapes forms or structures' (Blanchot 1987: 13). The tension between the familiar and the strange, between the fresh and the habituated (as embodied in the above excerpt from *Bilateral Petersham*) is addressed by philosopher of aesthetics Arto Haapala. In unfamiliar environments (that is, in *someone else's* everyday) 'we are more sensitive to the looks of things. They seem to require our attention much more than in familiar surroundings' (Haapala 2005: 46). The local environment (that is, *our own* everyday) is usually 'seen through' rather than 'looked at' – its *functionality*, or practical use, has become our primary means of interacting with it (Haapala 2005: 49). For this reason, he writes, 'we often have to make a special effort to really see the visual features of things surrounding us' (Haapala 2005: 48). For Haapala, the purpose of intentionally bringing attention to the visual (or aesthetic) features of the seemingly invisible everyday environment is not simply to make it appear strange (to “defamiliarize” it, in the manner of much twentieth century avant-garde art) but, importantly, to deepen our “attachment” to a familiar place. In other words – the purpose of this attentiveness is to strengthen one's relationship with the local environment, and to become more appreciative of (or attentive to) this transformation as it takes place.

To defamiliarize in order to see the everyday with fresh eyes - and yet at the same time, to not alienate from, but rather to *strengthen* the attachment with the world around me: this was the challenge

presented by *Bilateral Petersham*. “Swamped” by the familiar, and without the ability to exoticize my surroundings (which is the luxury of the tourist), I was forced to invent new ways to pay attention to the everyday. In the process of resolving the tension between the familiar (invisible) and the exotic (freshly experienced) within my local neighborhood, *Bilateral Petersham* showed me a new way of practicing an ethics of social engagement as research, which I propose could be useful to the field of relational art, as well as broader methods of study in the humanities. As Ben Highmore has suggested, because the nature of the everyday is to slip under the radar of our noticing, new “kinds of attention” might be required – in other words, *new research methods* (Highmore 2008: 83). One of the ways we might begin to fashion what Highmore describes as a kind of ‘avant-garde sociology’, is via art practice as research (Highmore, 2008: 83).

The Inventions of Bilateral Blogging

The method of bilateral blogging, developed through the projects I carried out in Kellerberrin and Petersham, offers one such method for paying new attention to the everyday. This is not to argue that this transformation dispells incoherence and elusiveness, which are fundamental qualities of everyday experience. Nor does bilateral blogging create a fictionalised online image of everyday life where everything seems to lock into place in a seamless way. On the contrary, the value of the method of bilateral blogging is that it creates a framework which allows the qualities of experience – whether they be deeply felt and meaningful, or irritating, or puzzling, or only semi-consciously grasped – to exist on their own terms. The expansive container which blogging provides does not require closure or fixity. Small observations, questions, ruminations, phatic utterances, and even self-criticism can sit side by side with more traditional processes of narrative and storytelling. As a tool for research, bilateral blogging is unique in that it is able to reflect critically – and publically – on its own difficulties, failings and struggles, even in the process of moving forward day by day. In this way, such difficulties can be raised to consciousness and workshopped in the public sphere, in a collaborative dialogical process between blogger and readers. Failure (for instance, my struggle in Petersham to see my local environment with fresh eyes) can be positioned *not* as something to be swept under the carpet – as so much embarrassing

“noise” to be discarded in favor of the desired “signal” – but rather as a source of potential revelation in itself. Using the method of bilateral blogging, the artist/researcher is also recast. No longer an intimidating voice of authority, my faltering online persona reveals me as simply another local resident (albeit one who happens to be attempting an unusual project). In this sense, one of the methods I developed for paying closer attention to what Blanchot describes as the 'inexhaustible, irrecusable, constantly unfinished' (Blanchot 1987: 13) everyday is simply to *name aloud* this difficulty as it arises – and this is something that occurs repeatedly throughout *Bilateral Petersham*. In this way, the banal, irritating, barely discernible aspects of daily life are able to continue to be noticed as such, rather than becoming aestheticized, or tidied up by the valorizing lens of art.

Walking and Blogging as Transformative Interventions

Thankfully, *Bilateral Petersham* does not entirely consist of navel-gazing self-conscious critique and despair. In order to engage with the seemingly intractable invisibility of my physical environment, I needed to *actively intervene* to transform my relationship with it. One such intervention was via a series of walking explorations, weaving together the textual meanderings of bilateral blogging with what Michel de Certeau has called “spatial stories”. For de Certeau, spatial stories can transform restrictive geographical territory – what he calls places – into *spaces* with multiple possibilities for a proliferation of unofficial uses (de Certeau 1988).

My own situationist-inspired *dérives* were an attempt to tramp, as close as possible, to the invisible boundaries which separate Petersham from its neighbouring suburbs: Marrickville, Stanmore, Lewisham and Leichhardt. Four walks – one for each cardinal point on the compass – had the effect of allowing me to familiarise myself with the territorial frame separating "Petersham" from "not Petersham" (Ihle 2009: 18-20; 48-52; 81-84; 139-142). This was by no means an easy task – often the mapped borders ran through fenced-off properties or across inaccessible railway lines, demanding compromise and inventiveness. Guided by a large-scale official suburb map, I attempted, rather absurdly, to walk as close as possible to the edge of Petersham, without stepping into "foreign" country.

The border walks revealed the arbitrariness of Petersham's mapped borders, precisely by treating them *literally*, as boundaries not to be crossed. And yet, despite the apparent absurdity of this ritual of exploration, walking the borders had a profound effect on my relationship with the local environment. This practice drew together the fragmentation of spatial arrangements which sprawl over the land: divisions which slice it up for sale or use (in this sense, *alienating it*) and brought these fragments into a provisional unity. In the process of walking (and blogging) Petersham's arbitrary borders, I drew an experiential line around my suburb, *creating it* as a meaningful entity distinguishable from other places. As de Certeau might put it, I wrote the edges of Petersham with my feet – an embodied ritual of circumnavigation.

The border walks were carried out in the company of friends or neighbors – companions and co-witnesses who could share in the creation of spatial stories. We collaboratively transformed not only our relationship to the geographical landscape, but also to each other. For instance, an account of the northern border walk, carried out in the company of my friend Sue, takes us along a thin median strip down the middle of Parramatta Road, one of Sydney's busiest traffic arteries (Ihle 2009, pp. 139-142). As I note in the blog, this incredibly noisy, dangerous strip of land does not lend itself to promenading, especially at dusk, during peak-hour traffic. However, the attentive framework generated by bilateral blogging encourages an open-minded, curious consciousness which can turn chance experiences into quiet insights.² Thus, although in this walk Sue and I experience the northern border as a fundamentally inhospitable environment for humans, our attentiveness to the 'constant din' of traffic makes it 'somehow...almost peaceful', and even conducive to a sensitive discussion about Sue's aging mother (Ihle 2009: 140). Shortly afterwards, our walk takes us past 'Miss Dee's Cake Shop' – a place I had never noticed before. In the blog, I describe the cake shop as a 'refuge' (Ihle 2009: 141). And indeed, our experience of being rattled by the noise of Parramatta Road makes us especially receptive to the hospitality offered by Elaine, the cake-shop lady we find inside. Bringing us pastries, she sits down with us, gently interrogating me about the distinction between art and craft. She also tells us stories about

[illegible]

This process of deepening one's relationship with the local environment via situated experience can be

seen as part of a process of developing a sense of “belonging to country”. Belonging, for the original occupants of Australia, did not involve owning land, as an alienable property, but existing in relationship with it, as custodians – the land and the people belonging to and caring for each other (Ihle 2009: 157). This deep conception of geographical relationality and responsibility is based on a radically different philosophy of spatial inhabitation to that which forms the basis of the standard western system of property ownership. In fact, as philosopher of law Alexander Reilly points out, this kind of relationship is distinguished, in Australian indigenous culture, by the word 'country' – as opposed to 'land' which can be 'commodified, subdivided and owned' (Reilly 2003, p. 217).

Furthermore, as Australian philosopher Linn Miller points out in her essay 'Belonging to country – a philosophical anthropology', the state of being that constitutes belonging in indigenous culture involves an intrinsic connectivity between the self and the environment (Miller 2003). For Miller, there are three basic senses in which connections to the world might be established. These include social connections (between individuals and communities), historical connections (to traditions and stories from the past), and geographical connections ('to a particular locality or dwelling place') (Miller 2003: 217). She writes that 'the self does not exist independently of the life it lives or of the world it lives in', and thus any path towards belonging must acknowledge the inherent relationality of the self, interconnected with these social, historical and geographical worlds (Miller 2003: 219). For Miller, politically progressive white Australians, conscious of Aboriginal displacement, have in recent years often despaired of the possibility of attaining, for ourselves, such a sense of integrated belonging, given our fundamental status as trespassers on Aboriginal country (Miller 2003: 220). However, she argues that in order to overcome this condition – which she calls 'conscious despair' – we must embrace and acknowledge the 'particular heredity, history or locality' which constitutes our own selves 'wherever and whenever we dwell' (Miller 2003: 223). Drawing on the work of philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, Miller describes this as a process of working toward 'correct relation' between self and world. Others have described similar endeavors as 'becoming indigenous', 'becoming native', or developing 'attachment' (Leff 2004; Moreton-Robinson 2003; Mathews 1999; Haapala 2005). Achieving 'correct relation', for Miller,

requires active work: 'Such a state of being is not something that just happens; it is something we must create for ourselves' (Miller 2003: 223).

Bilateral blogging, I suggest, might offer one such method for working towards a relationship of belonging to country, or “correct relation”. By positioning the researcher publically at the centre of the process of enquiry (rather than politely standing to one side of it and testing it from without), *Bilateral Petersham* demonstrates that this unconventional form of “aesthetic auto-ethnography” is able, not only to access aspects of everyday life which might otherwise elude standard social science methods, but also to radically transform the researcher’s relationship with the surrounding world.

Further Applications of Bilateral Blogging

The potential for this particular method of bilateral blogging to be further applied, beyond the projects outlined above, was first suggested to me by curator Jasmin Stephens. In 2008, Stephens commissioned me to produce a six month long public artwork called *Bon Scott Blog* (Ihle 2008). Although at the time I knew little about Bon Scott, the project brief challenged me to adapt my method of blogging, developed within the two geographical communities of Kellerberrin and Petersham, to a research process located in a “community of interest” – namely, the fans of singer Bon Scott. Scott, until his death from alcohol poisoning in 1980, was the front man for Australian rock band AC/DC. His legacy has endured, not only as a large body of recorded music, but importantly, in the embodied memories and cultural rituals of an enormous community of fans from all around the world. The international scope of this project meant that it was not relevant to utilize a *geographical* constraint, as I had done in *Bilateral Petersham*. Rather, with the *Bon Scott Blog*, I discovered that the key to embarking on this research journey lay, precisely, *in my own initial ignorance* about Bon Scott. I embarked on a six-month journey of public discovery, learning from the fans themselves. Focusing my attention – *by listening closely* – to the stories of hundreds of Bon Scott devotees, and feeding those stories back into a global community of fans, the *Bon Scott Blog* brought to light an aspect of popular culture which had not previously been given credence or value on such a large scale. Several volumes have been published on the histories of

Bon Scott and AC/DC, but never before had a researcher spent so much time and energy with the fans. As an artist using blogging as a research tool, I was able to take a unique approach to this enquiry. Placing *myself* as a central character in the *Bon Scott Blog*, as I transitioned from ignorance to fandom, this project re-enacted and dramatized the fans' own processes of creative cultural consumption.

As a form of research, the art of bilateral blogging collects micro-histories and rapidly feeds them back into a set of communities far beyond the constraints of geographical proximity. Reflecting on this, I would suggest that this kind of comprehensive, participatory, publically accountable research method may thus also have something to offer to sociological or ethnographic studies based in a broad range of communities of interest.

Where else can uses for bilateral blogging be found? The method has the potential to generate situated knowledge in a wide variety of contexts. For instance, to return to one of the originating impulses outlined at the beginning of this paper, I have already begun using a variation on this blogging method to experientially document the re-enactment of one of Allan Kaprow's early ephemeral artworks, *Push and Pull: A Furniture Comedy for Hans Hoffman*, 1963 (Ihle, Keys and L'Orange 2009). When used as a tool for exploring ephemeral art from the past, bilateral blogging can focus attention on the nuances of aesthetic experience which such artworks produce, allowing us, through our re-enactment, to make a richly described deposit in the art historical archive.

Blogging can thus create a reflexive document of value to the development of ongoing knowledge of the history and methods of art practice. Furthermore, the dialogical nature of blogging offers a tool for contextualising and re-animating traditional methods of archiving experience, such as photographic and video documentation. Building up a variety of annotated archival deposits – whether of everyday experiences in specific locations (*Bilateral Kellerberrin* and *Bilateral Petersham*), of cultural phenomena (*Bon Scott Blog*) or of ephemeral artworks (*Push and Pull*) could allow multiple iterations of a single situation to be compared with each other, taking into account different cultural, temporal, and geographical

contexts. This could be the beginnings of what aesthetic experience researcher Lizzie Muller has called ‘an oral history of media art’ (Muller 2008). In other words, as a new research tool, bilateral blogging might begin to operate as an expansive resource for research into some of the hidden corners of everyday, popular and avant-garde cultures.

-endnotes-

1. See Bourriaud 2002, Kester 2004; Lacy 1995.
2. In Ihlein 2009a, I more thoroughly develop the concept of an “attention framework” and its ability to transform one's experience (pp. 62-87). See also Ihlein 2010 for further exploration of the relationship between blogging and attention.

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