Australian National University

Chris Fortescue

Phantom limbic: notes on process

Chris Fortescue. *Naturalism #1*. 2008

Abstract
' . . . Simon, you're an artist, I've seen your paint spattered overalls and listened to your single-minded diatribes in dingy cafes. So can you tell me what the difference is between art and art-as-research? I get the feeling that art-as-research involves the production of knowledge, whatever that is. Whereas by-itself art is, you know, an indulgence of the self. Anyway, I figured that since you weren't around to clarify this, I'd just Google "define:research". The cloud-mind told me that Research was a full-rigged sailing ship built in 1861, renowned for the voyage it made from Quebec to Glasgow in 1866, during which its rudder was torn off by a Turner-esque storm-as-sublime in the Atlantic. The plucky captain and his loyal crew set about jury-rigging another rudder, only to have that one destroyed as well. Anyway, to cut a long story short, the crew kept on dismantling bits of the boat in order to fabricate a working rudder, but the implacable seas kept on tearing their constructions to pieces. In the end they made it to Glasgow, but the ship had to be towed into port and it looked more like a Venetian gondola than a cargo vessel since they'd had to produce eight different rudder versions on the way from whatever was available. So I guess art-as-research is something along those lines . . .'
Keywords: art; random walk; research; sublime; phantom limb

We wander in a vast medium, always uncertain and drifting, pushed by one
wind and then another.
Whenever we find a fixed point to attach and fix ourselves to, it shifts and
leaves us and,
if we follow it, it slips away from us and flees from us eternally. Nothing stops
for us.
This is our natural state, but the one most contrary to our inclination; we burn
with desire
to find a firm seat, and a final, constant base on which to build a tower which
will lift us
to the infinite; but all our foundations crack, and the earth opens up into an
abyss.
(Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, #72)

Often there's an echo in the minds of amputees where the sound of their limbs
used to resonate (Ramachandran & Hirstein 1998). Sometimes it persists for
days, weeks, years, and the reasons for its existence are not entirely clear. It
seems to have something to do with the way our corporeal self-identity is
mapped like an homunculus into the fleshy depths of our brains (Hill 1999:
137-38).

The drive to make art is like the Phantom Limb syndrome in reverse; it's the
urge to create an experiential site; a part of the body which has never before
existed but nevertheless seems to be generating sensation; to embody sensation
in new kind of flesh, so that the itch may be scratched. Let's call it the Phantom
Limbic, a strange emotional attractor that begins to take form as the everyday
shakes itself loose and the earth opens up.

Creative thought may be characterised by symmetry breaking events which
appear to come out of the blue, as if by chance. Something arrives from
between the certainties with a disruptive air, to fold everything into a new
shape and send it spiralling off tangentially with all the stuff that was there
before realigned, recomposed, reconvened. This is the Archimedean *Eureka!*
moment that cryptically resides in heuristic processes; trial and error
procedures in a space where the rules are unclear or don't lead necessarily to a
particular kind of outcome; the rule/space of the rule of thumb. It's something
art validates, a vital part of practice and perhaps the main reason to keep
working; a sense of surprise as the sublime erupts from between the encrusted
continental plates of the everyday. It's a variety of erotic joy; the promise of a
coming together of disparate elements in a fusion and eruption of energy,
change of direction, whatever. It's impossible to predict the outcomes;
attempting to do so muffles and constrains the process. Only in retrospect does
everything look cohesive and rational and relatively neat around the edges.
'Naturally one does not know how it happened until it is well over beginning
happening' (Stein 1926).

Art isn't primarily concerned with establishing new facts or knowledge
(although these may be generated as supplements in the process). Art is
concerned with the dissolution of facts. Art's purpose is to rupture and
recombine. It's the ocean eroding the cliff face, bringing to light fossils,
reducing the Twelve Apostles one by one to their constituent grains of sand.
But it's also a process of generating connections between domains, like salt
bridges in protein synthesis. In this sense art is inherently metaphorical,
producing conceptual cross-mappings of densely encoded cultural memory and

layerings of significance from which increasingly subtle levels of abstraction emerge.

The characteristic of emergence is that unpredictable stuff comes out of the mix that can't be reduced to the elements in the mix or analysed in terms of the elements. The elements retain their identity and a new level of order, a new meta-identity springs forth from the interactions between them. This is the essence of metaphor (Johnson 1981). In a metaphorical statement like *the truth is a wet road*, the primary elements retain their character while acting as connotation sieves for each other. The elements provide a ground for each other's figuration. Their interaction involves a continual oscillation between figure and ground states in which different points of view are leveraged, giving rise to an expanded semantic dimensionality; a subtle, nuanced level of abstraction characterised by adaptability, cross-contextual applicability, a sense of freshness and utility. The metaphorical identity is like an emanation; softer, more translucent and permeable than the elements from which it is made. The elements provide a framework from which an emergent semantic dimensionality resonates, and this resonance provides a context for the reinforcement of particular aspects of the elements over others. It becomes what Gertrude Stein called 'an arrangement in a system to pointing' (Stein 2004: 1).

The most interesting aspect of *the truth is a wet road* is the way the elements subvert each another's identity. The resonance they produce is discordant, unsettling. Think about it, doesn't art do the same thing as this? It takes something from the world we are familiar with and situates it alongside something else we are familiar with in such a way that the structures that provide the familiarity are bent out of shape. Art's positive action in the world is generated through negative intent, through boredom with the acceptable routine and a desire for a turbulent new fleshiness to ooze from the plastic wipe-down certainties that channel thought frictionlessly. Art says *'Yes, yes, yes; that goes with this in order for that to happen so we can all travel along our normal pathways, but wait, this other direction is better.'* And it says so without knowing for sure. Art just makes assertions. It doesn't prove anything or justify anything, it simply affirms connections. And if I'm the artist, the flesh I seek to conjure into being is my flesh, with my stink on it, and if you like it well and good, and if you don't, well then let's see your flesh. Art is opinionated, and making art is an act of faith. It asserts that the things we accept as certain and real are at best provisional, but nevertheless that's OK, because there is always something else, some other potential real. Art declares that the void is not emptiness, but pure undifferentiated plenitude, and sets about channelling it. Art's purpose is the evocation of the Sublime; the dirty threatening Sublime of Longinus [1] and Edmund Burke (1987).

The experience of the Sublime is an awareness of the fatal threshold on which the illusion of sovereign individuality collapses. It arises when the apparently seamless web of approximations, interpretations, naturalised assumptions and projections we regard as the real is ruptured by an encounter with something beyond conception, beyond imagination. Burke maintained that 'terror is in all cases whatsoever, either more openly or latently, the ruling principle of the Sublime' (Burke 1987: 58); that it is 'an idea belonging to self-preservation' (1987: 86); 'an apprehension of pain or death' (1987: 57). To experience the Sublime, one has to lose control, to recognise a higher power, experience privation. Burke says the sublime 'comes upon us in the gloomy forest, and in the howling wilderness, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or rhinoceros' (1987: 66). Both Longinus and Burke recorded a kind of pyschophysiological meltdown associated with the Sublime. It was a matter of

sensation, the antithesis of the rational. The untamable wilderness, the barbarians at the gates; all the enemies of civilisation somehow suggested it.

When Kant published his 'Analytic of the Sublime' the French revolution was in full swing. Things were scary, worlds were falling apart. The word *terror* held as much cultural resonance as it did in 2001. Enlightenment notions of progress and liberation through reason and the rule of law, all constructed around a Judeo-Christian armature of monological central control, were being challenged. Even the most optimistic thinkers expressed doubt, and despaired about the lights going out. Nature, exemplified by the earthquake which devastated Lisbon in 1755 wiping out a quarter of its population (Ray 2004: 7), was bloody, fascinating, dynamic, destructive.

For Kant, unthinkable chaos was transformed into infinity, a mathematical notion, attended by an increased awareness of one's ethical and moral certainties. Jeremy Gilbert-Rolfe describes it thus: 'the experience of the sublime is one in which the human subject at once experiences the overwhelming but then in effect overwhelms the overwhelming by being able to grasp it as a concept' (Gilbert-Rolfe 2001: 84). Subjectivity ingests the experience, adjusts its collar, breathes a sigh of relief that it hasn't been liquidated. But the Sublime is scale-free and eternally resistant to incorporation. What happens is more like Neo plunging into Agent Smith in the final moments of *Matrix* and blowing him to smithereens from the inside. The Sublime encounter is an encounter with what can't be owned or named or destroyed, because it doesn't exist in any form over which control can be exerted. All that can happen is that conceptions transform, adapting to the perturbations the Sublime provokes. And every cognitive transformation produces a new field with transformed opportunities for the Sublime to be enacted. The outside becomes the inside becomes the outside and a rose is a rose is a rose; the howling wilderness is transformed into something passing beneath the knobby tyres of our SUVs; rampaging rhinos are transformed into HIV and influenza. Burke's gloomy forest becomes the Tube station and the Skyscraper as the Sublime continually erupts out of the minutiae of the everyday.

Herman Melville's novel *Moby Dick* addresses all the aspects of the Sublime outlined by Burke (Glenn 1976). It records Melville's struggle to bring something unknown from the depths of the imagination to a place where it can be instrumentalised, only to have it slip away, again and again, a process ending with questing consciousness itself sliding below the surface into formlessness. The radical insufficiency of description is the site of the Sublime encounter, and possibly it attends any creative enterprise where there's a lot at stake. Melville's struggle was an encounter with *the Whiteness of the Page*. [2] Maybe Cézanne felt it too, staring at a bowl of fruit for days at a time, trying to effect a fusion of the seen and the represented. But the Sublime encounter is unrepresentable, in the same way that the punch line of a joke is unrepresentable. The Sublime must be enacted, situated in experience. The Sublime encounter is like the Zen concept of Satori; an event that destabilises one's sense of self to the extent that an entirely new understanding of the world's functioning ensues. But Satori requires a certain kind of preparation, doesn't it? Or can it simply spring out at you, in the form of the lion, the tiger, the panther, or Schrödinger's Cat perhaps? And how would you know it was Satori? The Sublime is the flickering aporia present in every moment, yet invisible, like the blind spot in the retina where the optic nerve is attached.

How does the notion of research fit into all this? What kind of research is necessary for art? Over the last few years I've been reading in the areas of cognitive science, linguistics, ecology, graph theory, information theory, game

theory, sociology. Each discipline is a language game, a discursive micro-world that theorises non-linear dynamics and network interaction in a different way. Each discipline coalesces around a framework of definitions that is mostly foreign to me; for example the main language of game theory is mathematics, and my knowledge of mathematics is rudimentary. Nevertheless game theory contains suggestive abstractions: *Three Person Games, The Prisoner's Dilemma*. The bridging of discursive spaces, cross-mapping or cross-filtering them to produce new meanings, new descriptions and new paths to action, is the essence of metaphor, so informational filaments between micro-worlds can be instrumentalised. For example the affinities between *Three Person Games* (game theory) and the *Three Body Problem* (astrophysics) might be amplified, since they're really just the same dynamic phenomenon wearing different clothes. But for an artist/researcher, a description of these affinities or a justification of why I thought they should be considered together is beside the point. I can simply enact the dynamic in a different discursive space, amplifying its resonance by embodying it anew. I'm seeking the emergent imaginative dimensionality the juxtaposition generates, and the sensations that arise within that space; a re-membering of the funny bone that doesn't yet exist.

I was also occupied with other kinds of reading that seemed to have nothing to do with what I'd outlined in my proposal; for example, I watched a lot of cinema. Sometimes I'd go to Blockbuster and take out a stack of DVDs and watch them end to end, with all the supporting stuff; the making-of mini-documentaries, the interviews with the director. Initially, there wasn't a suitable place for this activity; it was outlaw activity, evidence of my failure to apply sufficient rigour to the job at hand. But at a certain point, a saturation point perhaps, there occurred a realisation/bifurcation; the distinction between research and not-research I'd considered to be solid was completely friable. It was like crumbling teeth in a nightmare. Who or what agent decides what is useful, pertinent, constructive? What is noise? What is information? To what extent are research parameters simply an internalisation of the habits of the micro-world, the language game of Lilliput? To what extent do the habits of the micro-world inhibit the articulation of the apostolic messenger's phantom flesh?

This particular road-lubricating symmetry-breaking event was triggered by an unexpectedly informative chance juxtaposition of two films that suggested a way of thinking about the relationship between form and content in my own project. The two movies were *Nine Songs* by Michael Winterbottom, and *Ten* by Abbas Kiarostami. Both films notably refuse some familiar cinema conventions. They have no arcs of character or narrative; they have flat structures without beginning or end or conclusion (well, *Nine Songs* has a trace of these forms, grafted lightly on top of the repetitive episodic structure presumably to ensure it would be classified as arthouse and not pornography).

Ten has ten episodes, all of which take place in a car being driven through Tehran by the female leading actor. We're invited to watch and listen to ten conversations between the actor and people from her daily life as she drives them from place to place. There's no story line or plot to link the scenes together; they are connected by their setting inside the car. It's almost like surveillance footage, as if ten different episodes might equally have been chosen. Nevertheless the film has coherence. It provokes a series of questions, but never tries to answer them. It never seeks control; it simply opens onto a space and continues to allow it to unfold from within. As it does so, it produces an empathic ache of human embodiment.

After making *Ten*, Kiarostami produced a documentary on his own work as a seminar for film students called *Ten on Ten*, using the same structural motif.

This time Kiarostami is driving the car and we are in the seat beside him as he talks about the issues he considers to be important for his filmmaking. In the first nine of the ten episodes he describes his working process in detail, each episode dealing with a particular aspect; describing the evolution of his practice and its differences from mainstream cinema.

In the tenth episode he talks about the power of Hollywood to produce effective, affecting, cinema, and suggests that this might ultimately prove to be a greater problem for the world than American economic and military power. It occurred to me that in the arts, at least in the academic context of PhD production, we face a similar hegemony: the hegemony of the scientific method. The idea that one should establish a question or hypothesis, assemble a body of information, draw conclusions; justify choices, objectify process. But academic writing is simply a genre, like the action movie and the romantic comedy: a way of presenting information underpinned by the arcs of verifiability, knowledge construction and productivity. Like all genres, the conventions and structures of academic writing conserve energy and channel attention; they are soft-appliances with built-in semantic resonances. Genres facilitate ease of reading, because when you're inside genre you know what you're in for. You can relax and look for the nuances. Whatever the content of the writing, you know where you are. The carpet isn't going to travel unexpectedly from beneath your slippered feet. You are going to enter a world in which concepts are marshalled predictably and control is exhibited. You may encounter stories about the void and what other people have thought about the void, but mercifully the void itself will be clothed in representations. Here, the lion, the tiger, the panther and the stocky intransigent rhinoceros will be jumping through their master's flaming hoop.

At one point a member of my supervisory panel referred to an aspect of my project as a *'fishing expedition'.* Well, yes; but if I'm being honest, the best model to apply to the course of my research might be the Random Walk, a mathematical formalisation of a trajectory composed of a succession of random steps. Random Walk analysis is related to percolation theory. It is used in economic, ecological, and sociological modelling. It describes the path of a foraging animal quite well. Perhaps my research has been a 'nearest neighbour self avoiding walk in four dimensions' (Hara 2008: 530). Maybe it was *'weakly self avoiding'.* It could have been *'the true self avoiding'.* I'm inclined to think that all high level research is like this to some extent, and that the scientific method has been developed as a noise filter. But as an artist, I know I want the noise to stay; or let's say, I respect the noise, the zones where the meaning fades out into static, because it is there that a process of genuine discovery begins. And the ground only needs to remain solid for as long as it takes to get to the next step, just like in the movies, where our hero runs from his foes across a bridge as it crumbles beneath him into the abyss.

Think of it this way. For me, the mathematics in Game Theory is noise. For a mathematician it's exactly the opposite, the numbers are the true ground. But I'm like Paul Valéry, who said, 'What I look for in a book is what will enable or impede an aspect of my own activity' (cited Bayard 2007: 16). I'm a foraging animal on a fishing expedition, and when I hit the maths it stops me, and I look around and move on. I visit discursive spaces as a bee might visit a flowering plant. She's not interested in the leaves, the seeds, the branches, the twigs, the roots. She doesn't need to penetrate the unity of the plant, because from her perspective the centre of the plant is the nectar. She has an idiosyncratic interest she pursues in that space only until the nectar dries up. Her interest is an expression of the dynamics of her micro-world, the hive, a network that is somehow separate and distinct from the plant. The hive and the flowering plant are distinct networks yet inseparably intermeshed. The bee performs a kind of

analysis and abstraction, taking what she perceives to be a figure against the ground of the flowering plant and reassigning it in such a way that it becomes part of the ground of the hive, against which the figure of the bees' activity can recursively unfold. Meanwhile, the termites in the trunk of the flowering plant remain uninterested in the nectar; they might not even register it as a distinct part of the plant because they're really into cellulose.

In this sense, the noise of mathematical notation I encounter in Game Theoretical discursive space is like the natural resistance encountered by a hand-controlled tool working a material. I can overcome this resistance by increasing my attachment to it, working into it and through it, but I can also respect the limitations it imposes and work around it, in the process opening myself to new perspectives that might be made available through a change of direction. This is a matter of procedural style, and also depends on what my needs are with regard to the resistance I encounter. Perhaps I don't need all of the Game Theory plant, just the bits that my structure construes as juicy, because I'm going to boil it down and add it to some other stuff taken from other discursive spaces. I'm going to make honey with it. In each of the discursive spaces I've encountered during the research process, I've found a particular, unique, and more or less useful perspective on the nature of non-linear dynamics and network interaction. The interest in, the desire for, fresh exposures in the field generates the underlying search energy, and the abstractions that have eventuated from engagement with the field; words, images, objects, sound are expressions, embodiments of the process. None of them could be regarded as an objective viewpoint, but together they might produce a new sense of the field that might be useful for others. Or not, depending on their needs. I'd describe this process as performed metaphor; taking necessarily incomplete, that is, more or less porous descriptive chunks, and positioning them so they can filter and reinforce one another and generate emergent signification in ways which are inherently unpredictable, but ached for deeply nevertheless.

Academic writing is a genre defined by certain structural characteristics that channel meaning and exclude noise as much as possible. It misrepresents the noisy walk of research in art by imposing linear order retrospectively, in the interest of defining territory and trajectories for future action that can be justified and validated through connections to other established bodies of knowledge. In his influential 1973 paper 'The Strength of Weak Ties', Mark Granovetter demonstrated clearly that a flexible and robust network requires weak connections, thin wires stretched across long distances with many interruptions. Metaphor gets its power from long-range correlations in the semantic network. This is why it is important to be wide of the mark, resolutely off-message, and rebellious about causality. Thankfully, in art, certainty can be easily and endlessly deferred. In fact what attracted me to art in the first place was the way it seemed to privilege doubt, the provisional, the inexact, the peripheral. It is art's job to take long shots. As spaces multiply they become more and more specialised and individuated but, at the same time, the significant differences they embody are reduced in scale and scope. Meaty chunks become foam. I'm aware that the spaces I visit, both dimensional and discursive, are increasingly smooth, efficient, featureless. Under these conditions, the appeal of undifferentiated drift between widely differing zones that are only weakly aligned increases, because the search is not for something specific: it is for the stink, the texture, the bite, the resistance of an unknowable embodiment.

Notes

1. Longinus is the ancient Greek author presumed to have written *Peri Hypsous,* the text that initiated the modern discourse of the sublime after its translation in the late 17th century. return to text

2. A reference to Chapter 42 of Melville's *Moby Dick*. Entitled 'The Whiteness of the Whale', it contains an extended (i.e. a single sentence of 468 words) meditation on the connotations of the colour white. return to text

List of works cited

Bayard, Pierre 2007 *How to talk about books you haven't read*, New York: Bloomsbury return to text

Burke, Edmund 1987 *A philosophical enquiry into the origins of our ideas of the sublime and the beautiful,* Oxford: Basil Blackwell return to text

Gilbert-Rolfe, Jeremy 2001 'I'm not sure it's sticky', in Bill Beckly (ed), *Sticky sublime*, New York: Allworth Press, 84-93 return to text

Glenn, Barbara 1976 'Melville and the Sublime in *Moby-Dick*', *American literature* 48.2: 165-82 return to text

Granovetter, Mark S 1973 'The strength of weak ties', *American journal of sociology* 78.6: 1360-80 return to text

Hara, Takashi 2008 'Decay of correlations in nearest-neighbour self-avoiding walk, percolation, lattice trees and animals', *Annals of probability* 36.2: 530-93 return to text

Hill, A1999 'Phantom limb pain: a review of the literature on attributes and potential mechanisms', *Journal of pain and symptom management* 17.2: 125-42 return to text

Johnson, Mark (ed) 1981 *Philosophical perspectives on metaphor*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press return to text

Kant, Immanuel 1952 *The critique of judgment* (trans James Creed Meredith), Oxford: Clarendon

Ramachandran, VS and William Hirstein 1998 'The perception of phantom limbs', *Brain* 121: 1603-30 return to text

Ray, Gene 2004 'Reading the Lisbon Earthquake: Adorno, Lyotard and the contemporary sublime'*, The Yale journal of criticism* 17.1: 1-18 return to text

Stein, Gertrude 1926 *Composition as explanation*, http://grace.evergreen.edu/~arunc/texts/literature/stein2/stein2.pdf (accessed 5 December 2008) return to text

Stein, Gertrude 2004 *Tender buttons*, Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger return to text

I've been working as an artist since the early 1980s. My practice has encompassed installation, photomedia, sound, video, performance and text. My work is held by the National Gallery of Australia, the Art Gallery of NSW, the National Gallery of Victoria, Griffith University, Art Bank and other institutional and non-institutional collections. During the 1990s I taught at the University of Western Sydney and the University of NSW College of Fine Art. Simon Barney and I established and ran SOUTH gallery in Sydney during the late 1990s. Since 2000 I've been based in Vienna, with regular trips to ANU where I completed a PhD in 2009. I'd say my work is concerned with the dynamics of folding, the crumpling effects of our actions on the world which bring new juxtapositions into existence from ancient material and non-material

forms.
www.haresbreath.com