Methodological entanglements in the field: methods, transitions and transmissions

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While much discussion of art practice within research and university contexts tends to draw from 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' research, those practices outside the visual arts that deploy art-related methods and techniques often sit uncomfortably within other disciplines and struggle to be accounted for within official university accountabilities. This situation creates a divide between visual art accountable practices and those that do not fit. It is the latter category we wish to explore. As ethnographic researchers within cultural studies and sociology, the process of making and thinking through art-based methods is an integral part of doing research. Through the interdisciplinary process we seek to explore overlaps between traditional and non-traditional modes of making, presenting and transmitting knowledge to audiences.

As this special issue observes, art and ethnography have a long, interconnected and sometimes tacit history. In this article we explore the interrelationship between methods, transitions and transmissions as a way in which to understand both the traditions. Both art and ethnography involve processes of transmission and translation from the fieldwork or studio to the reader/ gallery. We will focus upon this issue of transmission between methods to final outcome and the types of accountabilities and frameworks.

While much discussion of art practice within research and university contexts tends to draw from 'practice-led' or 'practice-based' research (Candy 2006; Sullivan 2010), those practices outside the visual arts that deploy art related methods and techniques often sit uncomfortably within other disciplines and struggle to be accounted for within official university systems. This situation creates a divide between visual art accountable practices and those that do not fit. It is the latter category we wish to explore. As ethnographic researchers within cultural studies and sociology, the process of making and thinking through art is an integral part of doing research. Through the interdisciplinary process we seek to push boundaries between traditional and nontraditional modes of making, presenting and transmission to audiences.

Although some are reluctant to embrace changes borne of the affordances of digital media, many others favour the transformative potential of new forms of attentiveness to understanding, evoking and provoking the social world (Back 2012a, 2012b; Beer and Burrows 2007; Lury 2012). Yet, and possibly because of this, methodological entanglements remain at the forefront of interdisciplinary discussions. Drawing on two projects that blur art and ethnography we set out to explore the possibilities and consequences of an expanded digital and material landscape for thinking about new forms and modes of social description and describers.

In exploring the entanglements between art and ethnography within the context of transmission and storytelling, this article has two aims. First, it seeks to locate these questions in recent discussions around the role of new qualitative methods for exploring technologically adept, rapidly moving and multidimensional social worlds. Beer and Burrows have argued that socio-digital cultures operate 'at a clock speed several orders of magnitude faster than that of academic research' and in many instances are 'moving faster than our ability to analyse it' (2007, 1). This points to a potential restructuring of how we engage with social worlds and the means through which we represent our findings.

As Back writes, 'There is more opportunity to reimagine sociological craft now than at any other point in the disciplines history' (2012a, 18). For Lury and Wakeford, the dilemma lies in our need to examine 'inventive methods' whereby methods that cannot be separated from the research problem at hand: 'Inventive methods are ways to introduce answerability into a problem . . . if methods are to be inventive, they should not leave that problem untouched' (2012, 3). Here, methods arise in
the process of doing the research.

Second, we explore how methods themselves do not remain untouched within the practice. As Lury and Wakeford argue, we need to understand how methods are also transformed by the subject and content. These 'methods in the making' are 'methods or means by which the social world is not only investigated, but may also be engaged' (2012, 6). In taking this idea seriously, we explore multiple aspects of touching and being touched by the social world in relation to research methods, paying special attention to how they operate within social contexts, their capacity for 'messiness' (Law 2004), 'thinglyness' (Latour and Yaneva 2008) and the productivity of being an 'irritant' (Michael 2012). Specifically, what we are looking to interrogate is the dynamic interrelation between the method problem, maker, context, respondents and so on. Our focus is not just on how research methods emerge from entanglements with the social world but also on how they interweave with the researchers' conventional 'tools of the trade' and re-entangle with the messiness of everyday life.

The structure of the article is as follows. We start by framing the discussion in terms of shifts in methodological debates that take into consideration the expanding palate of tools for many researchers and artists alike. This is followed by a consideration of transmission in transition and how we might think about vivid descriptions and different ways to know and engage the social world. Finally we conclude with a case study of two projects that we conducted that move between art and ethnography in their methods, aesthetics and transmission.

THIS MESS IS A METHOD

This article responds to a growing interest in attending to less fixed and easily representable and more ambiguous, sensory and multiple socio-mobile constructions of everyday life (Back 2012a, 2012b; Büscher 2011; Jungnickel and Aldred 2013; Pink 2007, 2008; Spinney 2011). Büscher et al. call for attempts to resist the 'temptation to hold down and dissect these phenomena to study them' (2011, 1). Similarly, Back asks how we might 'account for the social world without assassinating the life contained within it' (2012a, 21). Here emphasis is on the desire to capture 'fleeting, ephemeral and often embodied and sensory aspects of movement' (Spinney 2011, 162). While mobility and transport scholars have been at the forefront of this shift, given the undeniable vivid dynamism of their subject of study, similar moves are evident more broadly in the social sciences and especially in science and technology studies (STS) (Hine 2012; Latour and Yaneva 2008; Law 2004; Lury 2012).

Mess is a theoretical and methodological focus for many scholars in this area of enquiry. Law (2004) defines mess as textures, ideas, objects, artefacts, places, people and emotions that are difficult to deal with within the traditional confines of social science; an indefinable array of complexities that are conventionally ordered and organised in the pursuit of knowledge. He argues that researchers are traditionally trained to extract neat linear arguments from messy and complex worlds but that traditional methodological approaches contradict our own understanding of the world and, in turn, limit the possibilities of other forms of knowing. What this means is that it is becoming increasingly necessary 'to teach ourselves to know some of the realities of the world using methods unusual to or unknown in social science' (Law 2004, 2).

Latour and Yaneva's (2008) research in the area of architectural representational practice brings to light the flattening of active processes involved in the production of knowledge. They argue that conventional methods fail to represent the complicated networks of humans and non-humans involved in the design process. The constant and messy interrelations between these actors tend to be flattened, smoothed or otherwise erased from the final form; what looks static is in fact a dynamic and constantly mutable process. To address this reductive process they call for new ways of 'generating earthly accounts of buildings and design processes' and set out to 'tackle the admittedly daunting task of inventing a visual vocabulary that will finally do justice to the thingy nature of buildings' (2008, 88–89). Latour and Yaneva draw on Etienne Jules Marey's famous photographic gun, a technology that arrested the flight of a gull, enabling the viewer to witness every single freeze-frame of a continuous flow of flight in a fixed format. For the first time, the minute movements of a living dynamic thing were transformed into a series of fixed images. Latour and Yaneva call for the opposite for buildings; a messy, more energetic representation that would bring to bear ever changing dynamic and multidimensional entanglements.

Latour and Yaneva's work draws on actor network theory (ANT) which emerged from early science studies in recognition of the role played by humans as well as non-humans in complex heterogeneous networks (Latour 2005; Law and Hassard 1999). Rather than privileging the role of technology or that of society in the shaping of a new artefact or system, it contends that both kinds of 'actors' are equally constituted and powerful – they are entangled. In the process of tracing the construction of a building, Latour and Yaneva (2008), examine not only the bricks, glass and steel but also the architects and engineers, their social interactions, sketches and drawings, models, hands, scalpels, stickytape, desks, glue, computers, the general public, weather and much else. Importantly, this approach means that buildings do not exist in isolation but are embedded within complex dynamic heterogeneous actor networks and that these networks are never fixed in place. They are constantly changing in meaning, touching and being touched by larger social worlds.

Another relevant example is provided by Michael who explores the anecdote in the realm of social science methodology to see how it might operate less as a subject and more as a 'means of interrogating the research process itself' (2012, 34). He writes about how the 'irritating' qualities of an anecdote are such that they do not fit neatly into nuanced arguments. They do something unexpected and uninvited, and in stubbornly refusing to cooperate cannot be completely erased or forgotten.

> In any case, insofar as anecdotalization troubles what we are busy doing and is instrumental in inventive problem-making, it suggests that such 'objects' of social science study, as, say, humans and non-humans and their relations are not simply analytic fodder . . . they end up as something akin to, for want of a better term' 'heterogeneous interlocutors' in the inventive doing of research. (Michael 2012, 34).

Dourish and Bell have also explored ubiquitous media as part of larger messier ecologies (2011). This messiness is again not considered negatively but rather in terms of an embedded part of practice that needs to be considered when exploring such media. They develop 'a "ubiquitous computing of the present" that takes the messiness of everyday life as a central theme' (2011, 4). They do this by addressing the far ends of mythology (the cultural narratives that shape the human–computer interaction research agenda) and messiness (i.e. the complex and contested realities of how people actually use and interpret everyday technologies). For Dourish and Bell, messiness is an important part of everyday life, and we need methods and theories that openly engage with this mess rather than just trying to tidy them up.

Broadly, what this literature points to is an acceptance of things that do not fit, of mess and surprising things that fall outside expected outcomes and disciplinary edges. Importantly, these things are not viewed as something to be smoothed over, hidden or erased in the final piece of work but are instead viewed as productive and interpretive lenses into social worlds. Taking its cue from this and other literature, the article seeks to embrace the messiness of research by addressing its thingly nature as well as the potential of methods to touch social contexts and operate as irritants in the process of doing research. We especially hold to the idea that 'they are methods and means by which the social world is not only investigated, but may also be engaged' (Lury 2012, 6).

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TRANSMISSION IN TRANSITION: TOWARDS VIVID DESCRIPTION

The popularity of digital technologies has transformed not only the subject matter for many researchers but greatly expanded the possibilities of communicating and circulating findings to new audiences. Yet debate and discussion about the tactics and techniques of translation has lagged behind their widespread use (Back 2012a). Despite pressure to make use of the same tools of which we study, and open up access to data, innovative findings are often transformed back into conventional presentational formats (e.g. conference papers and PowerPoint presentations) with far less attention focused on the possibilities of other forms of knowledge transmission. The result is that an open exploration of new knowledge transmission formats is not as developed as subjects of research and tools by which research is possible. As Orton-Johnson and Prior have argued there is an opportunity 'to evaluate new conceptual tools and languages with which we can flex our sociological imaginations' (2013, 3).

We are interested in the inventiveness of methods for artists and ethnographers who operate not just as ways of knowing the social but also for engaging it. This, Lury and Wakeford have argued, 'is to be found in the relation between two moments: the addressing of a method – an anecdote, a problem, a category – to a specific problem, and the capacity of what emerges in the use of that method to change the problem' (2012, 7). Laurier et al.'s (2008) study of amateur and professional video editors is one such study that links the role of the researcher's experience in developing new skills and techniques, not only in the course of participating in the field for the understanding of a practice, but also in relation to the broader production of sociological knowledge.

O'Connor's (2005) study of craft cultures in a community glass-blowing studio offers a comparative ethnographic approach. She writes about slowly learning to 'twirl' and 'gather' hot molten glass, which 'marked progress for the novice, who, accustomed to serving the instrument, finds the instrument through techniques actually becoming a part of her' (2005, 188). These new skills offered ways to reconsider the theoretical nature of her research into craft. Both the researchers adopt a close engagement with their field sites for understanding the nuances and textures of a particular culture and for putting into practice new representational tools for imparting sociological knowledge.

Yet, while the opportunity to explore messy objects and practices and ways of representing them presents an exciting time in art and the social sciences, in practice it is not so easy, and there are few practical examples. This is especially critical in the context of recognising the value of such entanglements in comparison with more conventional outputs. For many academics, knowledge transmission is linked to accountability. Universities require particular outcomes in order to comply with established frameworks. For many, the treadmill to produce more traditional outputs has left less space for reflecting and challenging conventions around methods and transmissions. It is not surprising therefore that these processes remain largely unchallenged.

> It is still the case that most social scientists view the research encounter as an interface between an observer and the observed, producing either quantitative or qualitative data. Equally, the dissemination of research findings are confined to conventional paper forms of publishing, and research excellence is measured and audited in such forms, be it in monographs or academic journals. (Back 2012a, 27).

This does not mean that mess or entanglements are absent from conventional research. Rather, that these more untidy aspects of research are hidden as part of an accepted yet largely unspoken part of conventional professional performativity. Often the failures in fieldwork, which are key to making new discoveries, are camouflaged in the process of constructing narratives. Journal articles are structured with clear linear arguments, and PowerPoint presentations render the messiness and confusion into a series of easily understood points.

Wakeford (2006) has teased apart the processes by which knowledge is rendered both visible and invisible in her study of PowerPoint, the ubiquitous frame for sociological knowledge. PowerPoint implicitly produces a particular rhythm within the conference venue as concurrent presenters talk through slides, answer questions, load slides, talk through slides, answer questions, load slides and so on. The resulting rhythm is one that attempts to streamline ideas and arguments, minimising delays and maintaining viewers' attention. Distractions are framed out. Embedded in this notion is that the transmission of knowledge requires neat and narrow linear logics.

Despite the area of mobile media being messy and evolving, conventional modes of transmission – often enforced as part of university work plans – mean that the realities of mess need to be curtailed in order to produce conventional and often out-of-date modes of transmission. For example, Twitter is an important part of the academic landscape for both official and unofficial modes of knowledge exchange (and for some performing social capital). Increasingly conference rooms are full of people tweeting, each translating the lecture into compressed moments easily a contextualised. And yet, has the lecture structure changed in order to account for these new modes of alternative transmissions that live on beyond the lecture space?
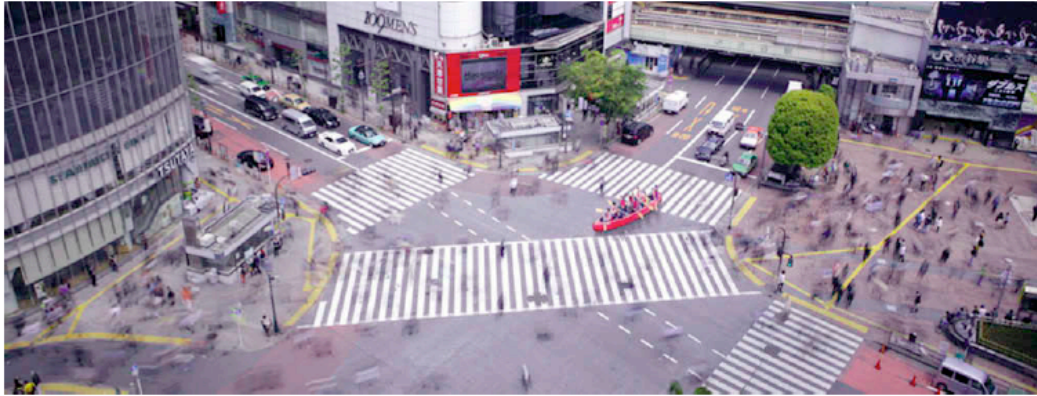
FIGURE 1. *Shibuya: Underground Streams*. A collaboration between ARC linkage *Spatial Dialogues* and Japan's the *Boat People Association*. June 2013.

So how do we think through creative ways in which methods, content and transmission might be contextualised differently? What we suggest is to think about how different contexts for reception and discussion can be gleaned from disciplinary and interdisciplinary streams. This is not a mere swapping of art modes with academic ones. Rather we propose to think through how the entanglements between methods and transmission can become stuck and unstuck and why this happens.

In the spirit of mess and entanglement, we draw on two projects introduced earlier to reflect upon collaborative, interdisciplinary practice and the insights gleaned from over a decade of our own work: keitai mizu (Hjorth) and Enquiry Machines (Jungnickel). We discuss collaborative writing as itself a method of entanglement and the disciplinary backgrounds that frame our individual research approach. We reflect upon the challenges of our own messy experiences in and out of the field and how this has informed our relationship to interdisciplinary methods and tested the limits of conventional methods and modes of knowledge transmission.

EXAMPLES OF ENTANGLEMENTS: INTERDISCIPLINARY PROJECTS

In this section we discuss two projects that sought to bring together art and ethnography in different ways. The first project was a mobile game called keitai mizu (mobile water). Keitai mizu was part of an Australian Research Council (ARC) linkage – Spatial Dialogues – that explored the intersections of public art, screen media and climate change in Melbourne, Shanghai and Tokyo. Keitai mizu was formed as part of the collaboration between Spatial Dialogues and Japan's the Boat People Association that took place in Tokyo in June 2013 under the title of Shibuya: Underground Streams.

Through a series of video, sound, game and sculptural narratives, Shibuya: Underground Streams sought to make the general public in Tokyo consider the underground streams making up much of Tokyo. In particular, the project focused upon one of the busiest places in the world, Shibuya (Figure 1). By placing a shipping container in a park over the month of June, the project sought to explore the idea of cartographies – water, emotional, social, playful, psychological, historical and geographic. Given that Tokyo is made up of numerous little rivers underneath all the trains and roads, we wanted to make audiences aware that they are literally perpetually walking on water.

The mobile game, keitai mizu, devised by Hjorth, invited Australian and Japanese artists to respond to an overlay between cartography and water by making water creatures. The artists made local and foreign, real and imaginary, representational and abstract creatures that were then placed (and hidden) around the Shibuya Park, Tokyo. Players were invited to camera

phone photograph and send as many local water creatures as possible in 15 minutes to the project in Twitter account (Figure 2). The game deployed both old (geocaching) and new (Twitter and Instagram) media to turn players into ethnographers.

The game space was blurred across online and offline spaces with Instagram and Twitter enabling co-present friends to share the experiences and images. Through the process of game play, participants became more mindful of the local water species as well as reflective upon the fact that the city is made up of numerous little rivers underneath all the trains and roads (Figure 1).

Keitai mizu attempted challenge boundaries between official and unofficial game spaces by blurring them with different modes of play (Figure 3). In particular, camera phone practices partake in new haptic visualities that bring emotional and social dimensions of the place and play to the official game play space and drive the motivation for use. By deploying camera phone practices as part of the mobile game, players can develop the melodramatic elements – the affective and emotional dimensions – to engage friends into the play of being mobile.
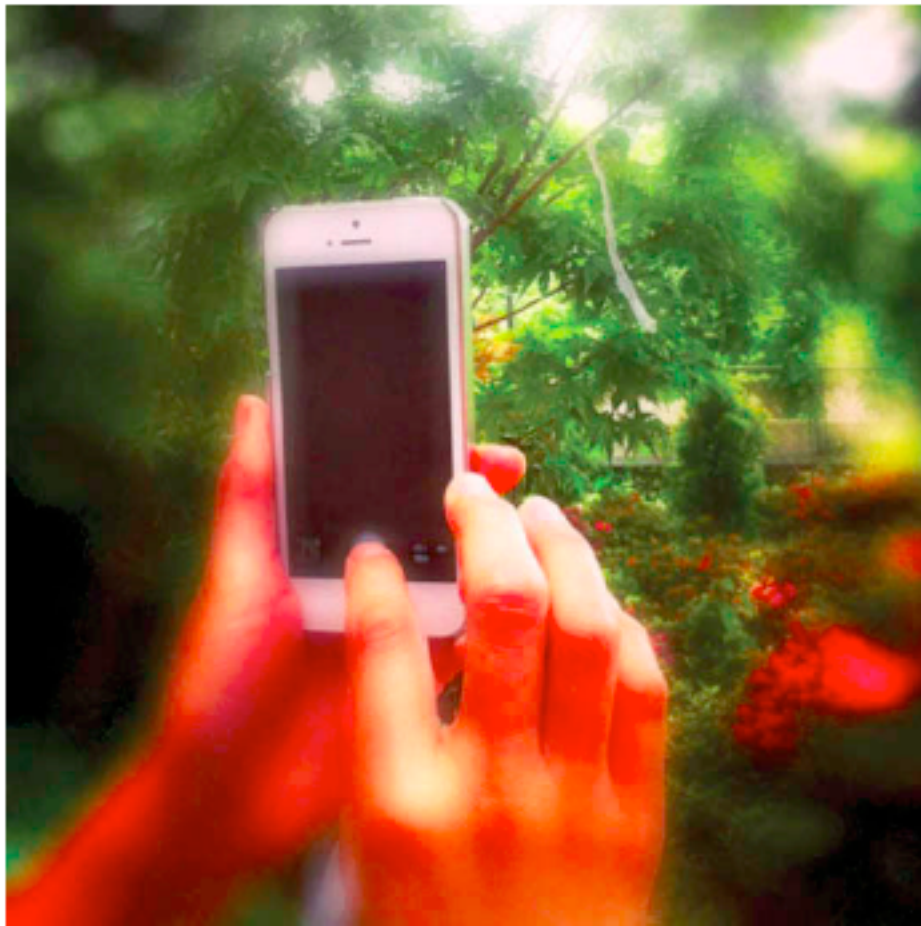

FIGURE 2. *Keitai mizu* (mobile water) game as part of the *Shibuya: Underground Streams* project, June 2013. Collaboration conceived by Larissa Hjorth. Photograph by Larissa Hjorth.
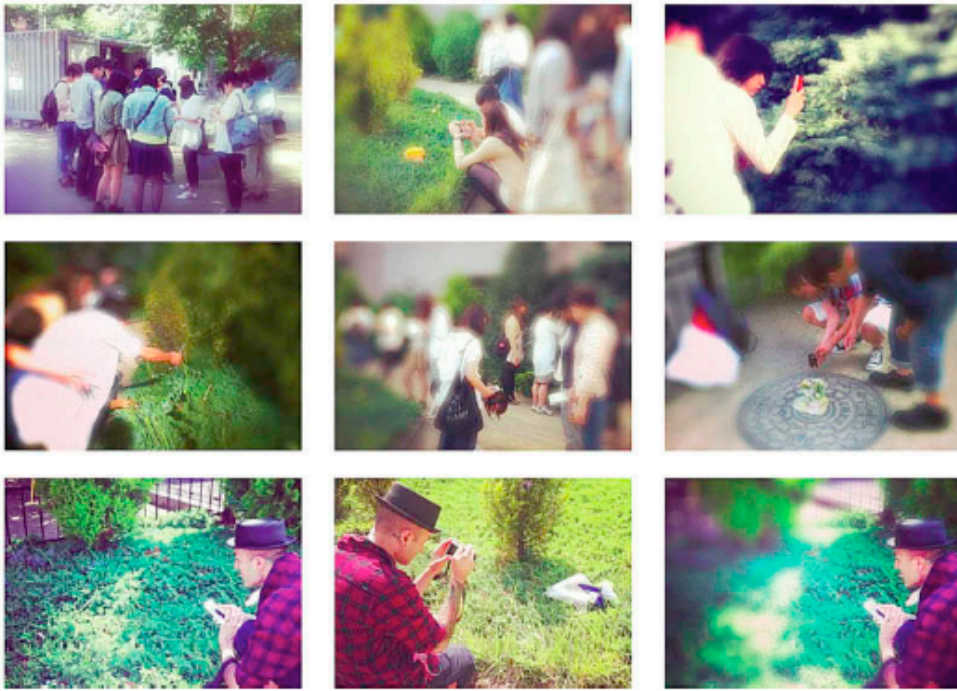
FIGURE 3. *Keitai mizu* players as part of the *Shibuya: Underground Streams* project, June 2013. Photograph by Larissa Hjorth.

FIGURE 4. *EM#1* in a Hackney Street, London.

FIGURE 5. Jungnickel and McHardy operating *EM#1* at EASST 2010, Trento, Italy.

Part of the enjoyment of the project was not only the entanglements between the methods and its transmission but also how the project lived on in different ways that saw the participants taking the key role. For example, when one student group came through to play, one of the other students took it on herself to document their experiences and responses and turn it into a short fi lm which she then uploaded onto vimeo. This video was one of the few artefacts of transmission left after the ephemeral work had ceased. Moreover, traces of the play could be found in participants' Twitter accounts, creating new nodes for co-present entanglement.

Enquiry Machines are a series of handmade machines, built from cheaply available, abandoned or recycled materials and designed to invite critical engagement with materials, methods and making practices. There are several in the series, and all are collaborations with interdisciplinary practitioners. Jungnickel developed Enquiry Machine #1 (EM#1) with Julien McHardy as a means of exploring the labour of sociological knowledge, the work to make arguments and assemblies of material, physical and social artefacts and practices. It focuses on the interview, a classic research method for eliciting data. Made of a constellation of bicycle parts, plastic, duct tape, weld and cable ties, this machine requires two operators to co-pedal, collaboratively setting in motion a series of chains, chain rings and cogs to power a dynamo light. In the process, they interview each other about interviewing as a method, bringing to light the sensual, social, emotional, physical, environmental and technological skills required to elicit and make sense of knowledge.

EM#1 is premised on the idea that although conventional qualitative methods like interviews open up enquiry spaces, little by little, the character and conditions of these interactions are invariably tidied up via the act of translating them into text. Textual interviews can be infinitely edited, manipulated and circulated as objects of knowledge; they are easily transportable and reproducible. Enquiry Machines remind viewers (and operators) that knowledge making is messy. Although the value of knowledge in alternate forms (beyond talk and text) is gaining purchase in the social sciences, the reality is that messier entanglements are often hidden away from public view, presented in finely crafted textual or visual arguments.

EM #1 is a direct response to this absence. This instrument of inquiry is so irritatingly awkward that
it cannot be flattened. It resists being smoothed over and tidied up. And it often fails. In the process, it relishes the mess of making, rendering visible the labour of knowledge and the machinations of human and non-human entanglements; opening up new terrain for interrogating what is revealed and concealed in the production of knowledge. The wearing of blue boiler suits further operates to iterate the labour involved as the operators explore the conversation of mechanics and the mechanics of conversation (Figure 4). We also welcome

engagement with viewers. To ask questions audience members are invited to interact with the machine and in the case of EM#1, they sit on the saddle and pedal.

This machine has been performed as a 'paper' at a European Association of the Study of Science and
Technology (EASST) conference in Italy, in public in a Hackney Street, at a Design Salon in a London pub, and more recently the process of making machines has been incorporated into workshop and class-based contexts (Jungnickel 2013) (Figure 5).

The project brings to light how knowledge is made from complex and collaborative human and non-human encounters is not easy. We work to make knowledge, be that to conduct an interview, make an object or create meaning. It requires constant adjustments, tacit knowledge, sensitivity to timing, balance, tone and environment and many other factors. It can be easily interrupted and things do not always go as planned.

The point of EM#1 is less about materialising answers or prototyping ideas and more about rendering visible other ways of seeing problems, formulating new critical approaches and literally seeing and touching methods in new ways. It is an interdisciplinary entanglement, a material method, mode of transmission and performance.

At their core, Enquiry Machines are deliberately designed to operate as irritants that push against conventional means of exploring and communicating ideas in the social sciences. They both touch and are touched by methods, makers and materials, so much that they cannot be ignored or cleaned up.
To reveal the messy and awkward mechanics ofenquiry is itself an outcome that an enquiry machine produces.

MAKING KNOWLEDGE IS MESSY: CONCLUSIONS ON COLLABORATIVE AND INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICES

> We need to move on from the arrogant convention in sociology to assimilate other practices on its own terms and within its own image (i.e. a 'sociology of art' or a 'sociology of computing') or a more collaborative practice that is mutually transformative (i.e. sociology with artor sociology with computing). As a consequence I am not suggesting that the boundary between sociology or ethnography can be collapsed with art but I am implying that research practice can be more artful. (Back 2012a , 33)

Collaboration, like interdisciplinary practice, is highly contextual. It perpetually requires translation as it moves through different transitions and modes. Rather than collapsing art into ethnography, we have outlined some of the ways in which research practice can become more 'annoyingly human' (Back 2004 , 138) characteristics as something important in shaping the content and modes of transmission. In this article we have explored projects that sit within and outside of our disciplines, creating a tension about the importing of methods and their effect upon disciplines and transmission.

This article began with a friendship made strong through a corresponding desire to play with boundaries between art and ethnography. Over a decade we often said, 'We should write together!' We have talked and played in unofficial spaces, mindful of the need to render these unofficial practices into official ones. But herein lay the problem – most conferences expected ideas and methods to be translated into PowerPoints. In industry contexts while the transmission of ideas may have been more flexible, there were still certain accountabilities that needed to be justified. Like many, our work has entangled, not directly, but as a result of co-present papers, attendance at conferences, in similar published formats, and both are

regularly involved in industry research contexts. We have often wondered how we could collaborate around these distinct entanglements and in particular how we might articulate our engagements in and outside the academy. This article is the fi rst collaboration as we ponder ways in which to reconfigure ideas of ethnographic materials, place, performance and participants.

A central theme in our work is interdisciplinary entanglements. We operate within and on the edges of
their disciplinary boundaries; Hjorth is an artist and digital ethnographer; Jungnickel is a sociologist and maker. For over a decade Hjorth has worked with the sociocultural and gendered dimensions of mobile media across material and immaterial formations and grappled with the two fields and their potential misunderstandings in transmission. This has had two outcomes. She has removed some of the messiness of fieldwork and play, believing that making art investigated the aesthetic dimensions of mobile media and ethnography explored the ethnical dimensions of participation and reflexivity.

However, within the systems of university accountability, Hjorth has sometimes found it hard to justify the art/ethnography experiments as conventional research. This accountability issue is very important as it inevitably structures the feeling rules and motivations for work practice. More recently it became apparent to her that she had the two explorations mixed up. It was the art making that pushed the ethics of mobile media and the ethnography that considered the aesthetics. This led her to decide to use art and game practice as both a method and a mode of transmission in a recent academic project as part of an ARC linkage.

Jungnickel is a sociologist at Goldsmiths, University of London, working on topics related to urban digital technology practices (broadband and wireless fidelity) and mobility cultures (bicycles and buses). Much of her work addresses mundane everyday materials and practices; the use of found, purchased and resourcefully adapted materials and improvised methods to re-imagine information communication technologies. Because making and DiY (Do-it-Yourself) culture is at the heart of much of her work, she reflexively approaches the production of knowledge by making things to make sense of things. Her hands-on practice results in a range of materials and objects, from machines, websites, blogs, films, printed materials, photographs, exhibitions, garments and installations. The messiness of this approach brings to light a range of challenges in the context of what is considered a sociological output and process.

This article has been about a modality of articulation, an indexicality of methods and knowledge transmissions. It started with a series of questions that we have sought to explore about the nature of descriptions and describers. While we have raised more questions than answers, what we have sought to do is bring to life the possibility of new forms of storytelling made possible through the re-imagining of methods, makers and modes of knowledge transmission. The work we have discussed here is an attempt to experiment with ways of exposing ideas and seeking responses and feedback in a number of ways – to touch and be touched in different ways.

As practices and industries begin to emerge from online and mobile media, there is a need to reassess the material and immaterial, the mobile and immobile in new ways. To understand this phenomenon, we need ethnographic methods that see mobile media as not just a media practice and cultural artefact but also an essential part of the researcher' s toolkit that moves in and out of messy mobile spaces. We need to understand and conceptualise the ethnographer' s role as exploring co-presence rather than co-location (Beaulieu 2010). We need to understand how haptic interfaces and 'applification' ecologies are relating to the thinglyness of everyday life. We need to understand that co-presence practices inform the ways in which play is localised, contextualised, gendered and generational. We need more spaces for playful inquiry that push boundaries of disciplines and transmission modes.

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