

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

On Not Staying Put: Georges Perec's 'Inter(in)disciplinarity' as an Approach to Research

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Abstract:

In a critique of contemporary universities, the philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig contends that 'wild and transversal writing is tamed and fed into the creativity-destroying apparatuses of disciplining institutions' wherein researchers are required 'to squeeze the last vestiges of their powers of invention into the straitjacket of the essay industry.' At the heart of this 'taming' lies what he describes as researchers' subjection to the 'fetish of method' and a reduction of the modes of expression, forms and styles of writing, which he claims 'have brought about a crass uniformity in the languages in which academics can publish.'

In this situation, Georges Perec's generous creative and critical experiments, and his 'inter-in-disciplinarity' (a term coined by Johnnie Grattan and Michael Sheringham) seem to counter some of the circumscriptions upon method within the contemporary academy. Via attention to the investigation of actual sites, and a series of spatial metaphors – of not staying put and crossing borders, of meandering and getting sidetracked, of oscillating or shimmering between positions – I want to reflect upon Perec's passage through conceptual fields, in order to draw out some potential implications for academic research through practice. Perec's willingness 'just to see what happens' offers an invitation to wander beyond our disciplinary boundaries: using the project and essay forms as methodological tools, along with the role of the 'knowing' amateur, I will argue for alternative, more mobile considerations of the intellectual and affective rigour applied to creative and critical work.

Keywords: artistic research; essay; inter(in)disciplinarity; spatial metaphor; practice; project.

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In a critique of contemporary universities, *Factories of Knowledge, Industries of Creativity*, the philosopher and art theorist Gerald Raunig contends that 'wild and transversal writing is tamed and fed into the creativity-destroying apparatuses of disciplining institutions' wherein researchers are required 'to squeeze the last vestiges of their powers of invention into the straitjacket of the essay industry' (Raunig 2013: 35). At the heart of this 'taming' lies what he describes as researchers' subjection to the 'fetish of method' (35) and a reduction of the modes of expression, forms and styles of writing, which he claims 'have brought about a crass uniformity in the languages in which academics can publish' (36). This has been especially vexatious within artistic research in the UK at least, where space for creative and critical exploration has been circumscribed by repeated anxieties about method, and by the concomitant limitations on the forms in which research might be undertaken and presented.

In this situation, Georges Perec's generous creative and critical experiments, and his 'inter-in-disciplinarity' (a term coined by Johnnie Grattan and Michael Sheringham (2005: 9)) seem to counter some of the circumscriptions upon method within the contemporary academy. Via attention to the investigation of actual sites, and a series of spatial metaphors – of not staying put and crossing borders, of meandering and getting sidetracked, of oscillating or shimmering between positions – I want to reflect upon Perec's passage through conceptual fields, in order to draw out some potential implications for academic research through practice. Perec's willingness 'just to see what happens' offers an invitation to wander beyond our disciplinary boundaries: using the project and essay forms as methodological tools, along with the role of the 'knowing' amateur, I will argue for alternative, more mobile considerations of the intellectual and affective rigour applied to creative and critical work.

Perec wrote in *Approaches to what?* that it mattered little to him if the questions he asked of the everyday were 'barely indicative of a method' (Perec 1997: 211). That they were 'fragmentary', 'trivial and futile' was, he argued, what made them 'just as essential, if not more so, as all the other questions by which we've tried in vain to lay hold on our truth' (211). Throughout his non-fiction writing his self-commentary is peppered with words like fuzzy, uncertain, fugitive, unfinished, shapeless, meandering and drifting; such terms are, on the face of it, indicative of vague or woolly thinking, but this apparently problematic language has been explored and recuperated in the recent collections *See It Again, Say It Again: The Artist as Researcher* (2011); *Intellectual Birdhouse – Artistic Practice as Research* (2012); and *On Not Knowing: How Artists Think* (2013). It is my contention that by proceeding 'methodically unmethodically', as Theodor Adorno has it, and as Perec continually practiced, we can open ourselves to different approaches to research than might be available through more orthodox scholarship (Adorno 1984: 161).

I want to begin with the idea of the 'project'. Michael Sheringham notes how, in a 1968 letter to Maurice Nadeau, Perec repeatedly uses this term to describe the various activities in which he is involved (Sheringham 2006: 257). In the introduction to their collection *The Art of the Project*, Grattan and Sheringham recognise that the form crosses generic, disciplinary and cultural frontiers, and that it is being used with increasing frequency to describe a range of recent/contemporary artistic, literary and critical endeavours – in writing, art, photography, film-making and so forth (Grattan and

Sheringham 2005: 1). Commenting that the 'project' has hitherto had 'remarkably little critical attention' (1) they go on to outline what they consider to be its key aspects. What matters most in a project, they claim, is the process, or the performance of that process, rather than that it necessarily reach a definitive outcome. In many cases the maker/thinker identifies as an amateur, a critical non-specialist in the field they are exploring, and this frequently takes place through pseudo-ethnographic approaches of looking, recording, inventorying and describing. There is a combination of exactitude, which demands rigour and discipline, yet this often becomes funny and irreverent. Such projects tend to be self-questioning and self-reflexive, and include an account of their own progress, noting shifts and redirections of attention, and discussing their actual or potential failure or cessation. They commonly take place in the 'thick of the everyday', but in such a way that inside (the studio/workshop/place of writing) and outside (the site under study or exploration) have a dialectical relationship to one another. Grattan and Sheringham set out the range of activity that a project may designate as 'something envisaged, something ongoing or something completed' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 17) and elsewhere Sheringham identifies how a project differs from 'such cognates as plan, scheme, undertaking, task, or endeavour' because, 'although it points to an end, a project makes the end less defined, more hypothetical' (Sheringham 2006: 388). Notably, for the purposes of my position in the current article, with its 'commitment to midterm actions' it 'implies a preoccupation with the domain of practice' (388).

The other creative/critical form set to work by Perec is that of the essay. Etymologically-speaking a trial, test or experiment, the essay's resistance to systematic thought and its open-mindedness as to what might (or might not) be considered knowledge is made plain in *Species of Spaces*. Sheringham notes how this piece 'disdains disciplinary orthodoxy and plays cat and mouse with organized forms and procedures of knowledge' (Sheringham 2006: 49), and that its apparent logical orderliness flouts systems by revealing their very arbitrariness. Whilst Sheringham begins his discussion of the form in Perec with a nod to Montaigne, whose early personal essays marked, he says, 'the emergence of a certain attitude to knowledge and a way of rendering the processes of the mind as it makes sense of the world' (48), it is significant that he chooses to read Perec in particular relation to Theodor Adorno's 1958 polemic *The Essay as Form*.

A touchstone for writers, artists, and filmmakers working through the medium of the essay (I note how it appears, for instance, as a key text on the late filmmaker Chris Marker's website) Adorno describes the essay's 'childlike freedom' (Adorno 1984: 152) to become excited by what others have already done and how it 'rejects the hostility to happiness of official thought' (168) which 'seals it off against anything new as well as against curiosity, the pleasure principle of thought' (169). He claims it develops epistemologically, as it manifests its own process of thought in the doing and that it is not concerned with first principles - 'It starts not with Adam and Eve but with what it wants to talk about' (152) - thus operating through connections via a form of associative logic. The essay uses the partial and fragmentary rather than the totality, and as such it makes reparation for the abstractions of thought; in this denser texture 'the thinker does not think, but rather transforms himself into an arena of intellectual experience, without simplifying it' (160-1). For Sheringham the essay and the category of the everyday both seem to deal

with a kind of 'non-knowledge': in trying to grasp the experience of everydayness, the essay forgets 'what we generally think of as knowledge' (Sheringham 2006: 49). Ultimately for Adorno: 'the law of the innermost form of the essay is heresy. By transgressing the orthodoxy of thought, something becomes visible in the object which it is orthodoxy's secret purpose to keep invisible' (171). In his view: 'The bestowal of the garland "writer" still suffices to exclude from academia the person one is praising' (151); the essay form is thus intellectual work that challenges the limitations of academic norms. There is a certain irony that essay writing remains one of the dominant forms of academic pedagogy, being the means through which students are trained to think and examine the intellectual world, but that once one has become a professional academic, then its practice is unacceptable. The structural rigour of the publishable academic paper does not usually accommodate the exploratory openness of essaying an idea or subject.

Holding in mind these conceptualisations, I want to focus upon three particular intersections between the creative project and essay form, and to consider their consequences for the methods we might employ as researchers. I will begin with the figure of the knowing amateur. There are clearly tendencies in both projects and essays for makers/thinkers to operate as non-specialists in the ideas they are exploring, sometimes 'borrowing' a discipline with which they then proceed to make critically merry. The artist Mark Dion's projects have, for example, seen him adopt the various roles of biochemist, ornithologist, ethnographer and archaeologist; and essayist Geoff Dyer has explored such entirely diverse material as jazz, yoga, photography, and the Tarkovsky film *Stalker*, though he has no professional 'training' in these fields. Even in his book on D.H. Lawrence where, having had a higher education in English Literature Dyer might be said to bring a certain expertise, he is quick to distance himself from those professional critics who are busy, he thinks, turning literary work to dust. Dyer rants against the necrotic effect of some academic work: 'Walk around a university campus and there is an almost palpable smell of death about the place because academics are busy killing everything they touch' (Dyer 1998: 101).

Grattan and Sheringham consider that a knowing sort of amateurism, a species of critical deprofessionalisation, can lay bare the ideological premises upon which disciplines rest, and in this there is an echo of Marshall McLuhan's argument that the professional tends to 'accept uncritically the ground rules of the environment' in which she or he operates (McLuhan 1967: 93). Writing on Dion, Grattan and Sheringham consider his approach to be neither wholly amateur nor professional 'but rather an exploration of the potential opened up by a practice strategically located at the interface between art and archaeology, amateurism and professionalism' (13). In a catalogue essay for the 2008 *Amateurs* exhibition at CCA Wattis, curator Ralph Rugoff identifies much the same thing at work, through what he called the professional amateurism prevalent in certain contemporary art projects (Rugoff 2008: 9-14). Such approaches are interesting, I think, because they can be critically reviving; art theorist Thierry de Duve asserted that 'the most important task for art and culture at the turn of the century is to find the means of discovering a certain innocence, but a certain innocence after the loss of virginity, after the disenchantment and after the irony' (de Duve 1999: 16).

The knowing or professional amateur – or a critical positioning that mobilises both positions or the space between them – can clearly be seen within Perec in relation to anthropology and sociology: not an affiliated anthropologist, he nonetheless makes use of its tools and approaches, seeking, via his work with the journal *Cause Commune*, for example, ‘to undertake an anthropology of everyday life’ but to do so ‘without subscribing to any ideology’ (Perec 1997: 210). And his use of the term ‘sociological’, meanwhile, to describe one of the four fields in which he thinks of his work as operating, is noticeably held in scare quotes (141). With his relationships to Henri Lefebvre and Roland Barthes amongst others, and his continued participation in university lectures and seminars, he was no naive outsider to the academy, but neither was he wholly bound to its disciplinary norms.

As Grattan and Sheringham remark, the amateur tendency to focus on the small things in projects is in itself a sort of dissent to the grander claims of many critical agendas, but is no less serious (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 27). In Sheringham’s consideration of *Species of Spaces*, he makes clear how: ‘The project or modest proposal, often apparently footling, is a stratagem designed to let something else be apprehended obliquely, something utterly serious and important’ (Sheringham 2006: 250). Perec’s concern for the ‘trivial and futile’, the focus on what is endotic, and infra-ordinary and his way of looking somewhat obliquely at subjects marks his difference to practices then current in the field and his dissent is manifest in his call to action: ‘What’s needed perhaps is finally to found our own anthropology’ (Perec 1997: 210).

Despite Perec’s identification with certain academic disciplines, he ultimately categorised the books he’d written as being different kinds of *literary* work, and he was apparently appalled when his novel *Things* was considered a masterpiece of sociological theory. In similar vein, Geoff Dyer’s photography book *The Ongoing Moment*, written explicitly as a photographic amateur, has since been acclaimed and adopted into the canon of significant critical works to be read by students of the discipline. This simultaneous use and disavowal of such contexts emerges in the way the writings themselves now operate, as creative works of literature certainly, but also within the academy as critical texts. Perec’s work has been used to inform approaches to fieldwork across several university disciplines, as Charles Forsdick and Richard Phillips make clear in their blurb for a 2016 symposium on Perecquian Geographies:

Methodologically, Perec [...] has much to offer, having explored methods of urban exploration and observation; classification, categorisation and taxonomy; spatial inventories and indexes; and geographical and ethnographic description. (Forsdick and Phillips 2016)

But within and alongside his sustained, durational observations and focused exercises, there are slippages into something much more improper, which break with the usual conceptions of serious fieldwork: there is the free floating sort of attention pursued at his desk or in a café, his drifting and meandering as thoughts or observations prompt recollection and digression, and indeed the failure of certain activities to sustain Perec’s own rules or intentions.

It isn't so strange, I think, that the amateur approach (from the Latin *amator* – a lover) should yield critical insight for, as well as the intellectual distance of operating from a position outside the discipline, there is the feeling too that these projects matter personally to the investigator rather than simply trying to operate in the professional realm where they might make generalized or disinterested contributions to knowledge. Geoff Dyer essentially approaches each of his topics from the standpoint of a fan, whose connection to the matter at hand emerges precisely from the intense feeling he has for his subjects; and for Perec there is often an underlying concern with the particular resonance of the sites upon which he focuses. According to Sheringham, Philippe Lejeune has identified how the twelve Parisian locations of the *Lieux* project were specifically linked to Perec's personal memories (Sheringham 2006: 258).

Along with my own desire to dissent from the academic status quo, whose limitations I frequently find straitjacketing, this amatory 'method' formed the motivation for my *Pam Flett Press* serial, within which I can discern many of the key facets of the essay and project outlined above. The Press took an explicitly amateur approach, being set up without institutional funding or validation by using my own resources gathered from a heterogeneous range of paid activities, such that it could explore its field of everyday aesthetics without compromise. Issues have taken different material forms dependent on their subject and approach: they have included newspapers accompanied by a companion concertina book of footnotes, via an audio essay supported by a softback book within whose pages are inserted a series of colour photographs, and a heterogeneous collection of printed, photographic and written matter bound by document clips. They have been distributed freely at talks and conferences, sent by post to those with whom I had discerned a critical affinity or who had expressed interest via email, exchanged with other independent publishers, and been acquired by academic libraries, all of which has enabled new dialogues through the creation of an informal and now expansive network.

In the first issue, *Call yourself a bloody professional* (Lee 2011a), which explored how the amateur does things from love rather than professional necessity, I took up Marcel Proust's contention that being in love is a perfect training for writers, since it makes them alert and suspicious, an assertion made manifest too in reflections on Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse*, where the frantic epistemology of the lover is exemplified: lovers are concerned with interpreting and analysing the most minute of details for their import, because, when one is (or has been) in love with something or someone, the analysis *really* matters. One can extrapolate this to the 'proper' critical work of a close reading driven by a real sense of care. Stephen Rowland, drawing on Spinozist philosophy, has claimed 'intellectual love [...] provides an excellent basis for academic enquiry', because to be in love with a person or a subject brings with it a desire to know that someone or something more intimately, arguing that 'it suggests a continuing and developing interest rather than one that becomes exhausted once the initial question has been answered' (Rowland 2006: 111). I want to note here the sense of going on, or going beyond, to which I'll return later.

The amatory approach to investigations emerges in some current discussions within and about artistic research. The Finnish philosopher Tuomas Nevanlinna has written of the need to liberate those artists pursuing doctoral study from the burden of having to address a complex philosophical canon in order to say something 'academically respectful'

in their research (Nevanlinna in Ziegler 2011: 28). He urges them to get rid of 'the all too reverent attitude with regard to philosophers. You can use them unashamedly for your own purposes, misunderstand them fruitfully', and he goes on to assert: 'Read the classics "sexually", as it were, rather than dutifully and exegetically: love them, fuse with them, use them to your own enjoyment' (29). This is connected in Nevanlinna's thinking to what might be considered the non-expert position within the research and supervision of doctoral projects: for artistic researchers, he says, each project is a process of defining the rules from scratch. He writes: 'All artists engaging themselves in artistic research are in a sense compelled to do research for the first time – everything in the field of artistic research is a pioneering work' so that as a result 'artistic researchers and their supervisors are not merely applying pre-existing rules but jointly creating and developing those rules' (27). He also articulates his own actively non-expert position as a supervisor for artist Denise Ziegler's project: 'I was rather like the stupid guy in a movie to whom the science content, the mechanism of a bomb or the time machine or whatever – has to be explained and who thus acts as a stuntman for the audience. In terms of substance, my contribution was close to nil' (28).

Serious amateur creative and critical investigations have a history. In *Call yourself a bloody professional* I turned to Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi who recalls that: 'There was a time when it was admirable to be an amateur poet or a dilettante scientist, because it meant that the quality of life could be improved by engaging in such activities.' He suggests the reason that the term came to a term of abuse is because 'increasingly the emphasis has been to value behaviour over subjective states; what is admired is success, achievement, the quality of performance rather than the quality of experience. Consequently it has become embarrassing to be called a dilettante, even though to be a dilettante is to achieve what counts the most - the enjoyment one's actions provide' (Csikszentmihalyi 2002: 140). (The word dilettante originates, of course, in the Latin *delectare* - to find delight in.) I reflected that Csikszentmihalyi's point would have been well understood by Roland Barthes, about whom Susan Sontag thought that through his late writings he repeatedly disavows the roles of authority or expert 'in order to reserve for himself the privileges and freedoms of delectation' (Sontag 1982: x).

I see a need at work in the amateur approach to essays and projects: they are important to the actual lived experience of those of us who make them. In thinking/making in this way, we are often trying to discover a way forward in what we do or how we may live – to find a way to 'go on'; and we may indeed seek to note present delight or create future wellbeing. Adorno's rejection of 'the hostility to happiness of official thought' emerges memorably in Perec's joyful enumerations of the words selected as an 'index' of sorts for *Species of Spaces*, which include Angostura, Carpet of earth, Consommé, Furtive glance, Large red 'O', Monkey wrenches, Pedal bin, Toast, and conclude with Wright, Frank Lloyd (Perec 1997: 93-5). Or there is the playful re-imagination of *The Apartment*, where household rooms are reinvented as they might be used, were we to think differently of them: a room for particular senses – a gustatorium for tasting, a palpoir for feeling, or a room for each day of the week – a lundoir, mardoir, mercredoir (31). That he writes on miscellaneous subjects – fashion, spectacles, ordering his books, reading, certain streets or neighbourhoods, on writing itself – and sets out the

habitually overlooked details about these matters, or makes meandering and multiple reflections, seems to be because investigating these matters is enlivening, personally significant or indeed essential to the project of living: 'Writing protects me. I advance beneath the rampart of my words, my sentences, my skillfully linked paragraphs, my astutely programmed chapters' (123).

Alongside a potential intensification by the personal significance of analysis, amateur dissidence also offers the possibility of movement and of new paths to be explored. In the Pam Flett Press, I drew upon historian Daniel Boorstin who saw the potential of the amateur's 'wonderful vagrancy into the unexpected', and who suggested: 'An enamoured amateur need not be a genius to stay out of ruts he has never been trained in...' (Boorstin 1990: 29). The desire for mobility is surely present too in Dyer's claim that he 'tended to grow out of subjects relatively quickly, as opposed to being able to remain really interested in one area and then plow that furrow for a whole life' (Dyer 2013). Elsewhere he makes clear he is not interested in applying a uniform template to the different subjects he has explored: 'The idea is that each book arrives at a form and a style that is appropriate to the subject' (Dyer 2012). For Perec too there was the determination not to write two things the same, nor to 'repeat in one book a formula, a system or manner developed in an earlier book' (Perec 1997: 141). His thinking and writing is continually setting up and then breaking or exceeding the categories and classifications he has come to, because a certain disorder and indeterminacy are enlivening, and offer a chance to exceed what had been thought possible. In his discussion of classification he says:

All utopias are depressing because they leave no room for chance, for difference, for the "miscellaneous". Everything has been set in order and order reigns. Behind every utopia there is always some great taxonomic design: a place for each thing and each thing in its place. (191)

Whilst 'we'd like to believe that a unique order exists that would enable us to accede to knowledge in one go' what happens instead is that 'we oscillate between the illusion of perfection and the vertigo of the unobtainable' (155). When Perec writes rather colloquially that 'taxonomy can make your head spin' (195) I take this both as his describing the problem of categorization and as a movement, a creative dizziness perhaps, through which we are energized to come up with new ways forward.

Referring to McLuhan's assertion that "The "expert" is the man who stays put" (McLuhan 1967: 93), I noted in *Call yourself a bloody professional* that:

Expertise does not necessarily prevent the intellectual journeying of curiosity, but very often a focus on defending the expert's current thesis leads to a battening down of the intellectual hatches, rather than an open engagement with what might be possible as a result of the knowledge they hold. (Lee 2011: unpaginated)

Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis, and Michael Schwab have argued:

It seems to us that artistic research is an activity for border-crossers who, when negotiating frontiers, carry out their research somewhat differently from those who expand knowledge by inflating known territories or by registering a new claim in the hope that they will strike gold while keeping others out. (Dombois et al 2011: 11)

Perec's work opens up concerns, creates and then collapses or exceeds classifications, and which ultimately broadens the way one might think rather than arriving at a final conclusion to be defended at all costs. The knowing, enamoured amateur, someone willing not to adhere to the discipline as it currently stands, but to pursue their miscellaneous curiosities out of love and concern is, I believe, important as a way of broadening what it is possible for us to think and how we might go on in our research.

As the second key conjunction of the essay and project form, I want to discuss the simultaneity of the creative and critical – a creative criticality and a critical creativity, if you will. By this I mean that there is very often a self-questioning and self-reflexive voice at work, one which comments on the writer/project's intention, on what it is doing (or not doing), which reflects upon the pitfalls into which it might stumble (or indeed has already done so), and which uses the form and process of the making itself as a means of thinking. Perec's writing is full of his own self-reflection. In *The Gnocchi of Autumn*, he asks a series of questions of himself in relation to his having become a writer:

Did I then have something so very particular to *say*? But what have I said? What is there to say? To say that one *is*? To say that one writes? To say that one is a writer? A need to communicate what? A need to communicate that one has a need to communicate? That one is in the act of communicating? (Perec 1997: 122)

And in *The Scene of a Stratagem*, a piece about his own psychoanalysis, he wonders: 'why do I need to write this text? Who is it really intended for? Why choose to write, and to make public, what was perhaps named only in the secrecy of the analysis' (165). Perec is alert to his rhetorical use of 'the excuse, whereby, instead of confronting the problem needing to be resolved, one is content to reply to questions by asking other questions, taking refuge each time behind a more or less feigned incompetence' (189) and to his own propensity for wandering away from what he had intended: 'I've been writing pieces of autobiography that were being constantly sidetracked' (132).

In *Think/Classify*, the essay reflects directly upon the problematic process of its own writing, and in trying to deal with the very subject of thinking and classification:

At the different stages of preparation for this essay – notes scribbled on notebooks or loose sheets of paper, quotations copied out, 'ideas', see, cf., etc. – I naturally accumulated small piles: lower-case b, CAPITAL I, thirdly, part two. Then, when the time came to bring these elements together (and they certainly needed to be brought together if this 'article' was one day to cease being a vague project regularly put off until a less fraught tomorrow), it rapidly became clear that I would never manage to organize them into a discourse. (Perec 1997: 188)

When Perec remarks his difficulty ordering the material and notes the fuzzy, fugitive, unfinished nature of what he has accumulated, he deliberately chooses to 'preserve the hesitant and perplexed character of these shapeless scraps and abandon the pretence of organizing them into something resembling [...] an article' (189) such that the piece itself ultimately draws into question what classification is and does, and as result what can be thinkable, and through his writing, sayable.

The form itself thus becomes part of the self-conscious criticism, as when, amidst a whole series of lists and categorizations, one section on 'The ineffable joys of enumeration' reflects how:

In every enumeration there are two contradictory temptations. The first is to list everything, the second is to forget something. The first would like to close off the question once and for all, the second to leave it open. Thus between the exhaustive and the incomplete, enumeration seems to me to be, before all thought (and before all classification), the very proof of that need to name and to bring together without which the world ('life') would lack any points of reference for us. (Perec 1997: 198)

In *Gumming up the works*, the third issue of the Pam Flett Press, a key theme was my own inability to get on with its writing or to finally come to a conclusion, but via a series of discussions of this situation – including problems of procrastination, a terrible fear of omission, a comparison of artist's and writer's block, the time needed for chewing over and digestion or composting of the material researched such that it can be transformed into fertile production – it generated a series of digressive footnotes alongside the formal essay itself, such that the writing ultimately ran to some 36000 words (Lee 2013). As a means of recognizing the importance of its digressions, and the space of associative knowledge, the formal essay dematerialised to take the form of an online audio recording, which ran to just under an hour of listening time, whilst the carefully designed and printed publication was formed wholly from excessive footnotes (about lichen, large format photography, islands, creative block, binary erotics, fiddling, getting side-tracked, stickiness, shit, disgust, using animals to think with, the Katamari Damacy computer game, tumbleweed methodology, hoarding, clutter, impropriety, rubbish...) the generation of which, I came to realise, had become the point of the exercise... This edition in particular became particularly meta-critical in just the way Grattan and Sheringham identified: it reflects upon practice, upon its own making and its own form; it articulates as it goes how it is starting to function, and what it is becoming; it recognises how what started as one thing (a disquisition on the everyday material of chewing gum) has become something other; that the thing about which it was thinking, has in turn thought *it* (and me, its writer) transformatively.

Grattan and Sheringham make clear how in contemporary artists/writers' projects the exploration is as important as any results: 'the artist's searchings take on an autonomous value alongside his/her findings, and our vision of the end-product becomes transformed and re-enlivened by our understanding of it as the last – or latest – stage of a project' (8). Very commonly such endeavours use the work of writing or making as an opportunity to find out and question what the project or essay (and its maker) might

actually be up to, as indeed happened through the Pam Flett Press. For Perec: 'Even if what I produce seems to derive from a programme worked out a long time ago, from a long-standing project, I believe rather that I discover – that I prove – the direction I am moving in by moving' (Perec 1997: 142). He articulates the sense that his books are 'describing point by point the stages of a search, the 'why' of which I can't tell, only the 'how' (143). As Sheringham recognises, Perec's non-fiction most often seems a project allied to ideas of emergence – things are known, come into being through the writing, though equally the thing to be understood continues to move further away. Perec describes how he is tracing 'a tentative itinerary' and offers the comment that 'I muddle along' (196), feeling his way 'meandering in the midst of words' (202).

Given that as a result any position arrived at seems provisional and knowledge gained to be very temporary, such an approach seems at odds with orthodox conceptions of research, the language of vagueness inappropriate to the clarity and rigour proper to academic inquiry. This then is the third aspect to be considered in the current article. It's not that the projects discussed by Grattan and Sheringham are without serious labour and endeavour; in many cases the investigator who 'remains unofficial, amateur, a non-specialist' and who 'mixes subjectivity and objectivity, high-minded speculation and parodic subversion' still devises and carries out the work 'with an exactitude that can border on the manic' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 10). Here we might think of Perec's *Attempt at an Inventory of the Liquid and Solid Foodstuffs Injurigated by Me in the Course of the Year Nineteen Hundred and Seventy-Four* and indeed of *Eat 22*, a similar more recent project by British artist Ellie Harrison where she photographed everything she ate across the course of a year, starting on her 22nd birthday and ending precisely on her 23rd (Harrison 2013). This daily recording, sustained for so long and resulting in some 1640 images, is clearly an epic kind of endeavour.

As Grattan and Sheringham point out there is frequently a 'singular determinant', a device used to generate the parameters of the investigation, which may appear to be 'randomly chosen, ludic, eccentric or downright inappropriate' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 21-2). Of French artist Sophie Calle's project *Days under the sign of B, C and W*, they describe how she undertakes particular journeys and activities guided by a specific letter: on the day designated to be W, the French artist chose a *weekend* to journey by train

in a wagon-lit to the Walloon region of Belgium', taking with her 'a Walkman, a laptop allowing her to access the World Wide Web, the writings of Walt Whitman and a copy of Perec's part-fictional, part-autobiographical work, *W or The Memory of Childhood*. (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 20-1)

For photographer Keith Morris, meanwhile, his determinant is his own name: he decides to contact every Keith Morris in Wales by means of the telephone directory – an attempt to be 'comprehensive' – and to photograph and interview them in a project he intends to lodge in the National Museum of Wales where it will offer, he believes, a particular exploration of personal and national identity. (It strikes me that a further particularity will be at work here: given the rise of the mobile phone over the landline, and people's desire

to avoid spam calls by going ex-directory, the project will surely also reflect a historical moment evidencing the profound shift in our use of technology, something I'm certain it didn't set out to do.)

Grattan and Sheringham suggest that the approach taken in such projects clearly operates with some system and seriousness, and that 'considerable time, energy and commitment [...] has gone into the project' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 8). But they also recognise that 'from the perspective of the professional surveyor [it] would nevertheless be considered far too experimental and arbitrarily selective for methodological comfort' (24).

In 'the art of the project' the maker/thinker is 'someone who collects, observes, classifies, enumerates, compares, who is rigorous and disciplined whilst at the same time humorous and irreverent' (Grattan and Sheringham 2005: 10). They are, to use again Adorno's useful phrase, 'methodically unmethodical'.

Now the sort of projects described by Grattan and Sheringham (2005) were never intended to perform as serious pieces of academic research; they were creative activities that made (and were able to break) their own rules at the will of the artist, or in reaction to the phenomena encountered, rather than needing to adhere to any institutional or disciplinary regulation. That these 'inter(in)disciplinary' projects can provide 'an alternative to strictly scientific or abstract modes of understanding' and have the 'capacity to offer alternative, indirect ways of knowing' (9) does however offer important lessons, which relate to what Hito Steyerl has described as 'a certain "edge of resistance" against dominant modes of knowledge production' within artistic research or the academy more broadly (Steyerl 2012: 60).

Emma Cocker's *Tactics for not knowing: preparing for the unexpected* offers an articulation of this resistance, considering investigations through practice as sometimes being about 'making something less known' and 'staying within the experience of not knowing for as long as it is somehow generative' (Cocker 2013: 127). She describes the tactics of remaining receptive, wandering, and getting lost, and articulates practice 'as an endless series of maybes, an interminable set of tests of trials', through which there is no definitive conclusion (130). Such activity offers ways 'to stop things getting assimilated all too quickly back into meaning, from being classified or (re)claimed swiftly by existing knowledge' (130). She writes that it is 'necessary to *know* how not to know' and that:

[n]ot knowing is not experience stripped clean of knowledge, but a mode of thinking where knowledge is put into question, made restless or unsure. Not knowing unsettles the illusory fixity of the known, shaking it up a little in order to conceive of things differently. (131)

The 'illusory fixity' is made manifest in Perec's work on classification:

My problem with classifications is that they don't last; hardly have I finished putting things into an order before the order is obsolete. Like everyone else, I presume, I am sometimes seized by a mania for arranging things. The sheer number of the things needing to be arranged and the near impossibility of distributing them according to

any truly satisfactory criteria mean that I never finally manage it, that the arrangements I end up with are temporary and vague, and hardly any more effective than the original anarchy. (Perec 1997: 196)

His tarrying in a realm between stable and provisional classifications is just the sort of thing to put knowledge into question as Cocker suggested. What's more, I think Perec also articulates the process of thinking through practice when he remarks his difficulty organizing material and describes how he feels his way, making, taking apart, making again; with his muddling along and managing to cope there's a tolerance of what is unresolvable.

The idea of remaining *with* uncertainty and inconsistency is at the heart of the essay, as I made clear in *Lord Biro and the writing on the wall*, the second issue of my Pam Flett Press, where I noted essayist Hans Magnus Enzensberger's attachment to tentative judgments and spirited defence of the form's willingness to embrace contradictions (Lee 2011b: unpaginated). It was something I developed in the *Press*' fourth issue *Vague terrain* (Lee 2014), which began with an investigation of actual spaces of between-ness – sites now derelict and awaiting a new purpose or redevelopment, as for example, the former Spode ceramics factory in Stoke-on-Trent – but found itself exploring more conceptual manifestations of the liminal and in between, so much a feature of recent art practice and research. That the publication itself emerged slowly across almost a decade of work through the conjunction of walking, photographing, writing, remembering, reading and thinking, and found form through poetic/descriptive texts and photography, recollection and critical reflection, resulted in a series of discrete but yet inter-related essayings of its concepts, where the point was to hold heterogeneous ideas in tension, rather than adopting any definitive position. I have come to think of this as a shimmer between positions, borrowing from Roland Barthes' description of an 'inventory of shimmers, of nuances, of states, of changes' (Barthes 2005: 77) and his sense that these slippages, inversions or convolutions proceed beyond yes/no binaries; for him shimmer has the effect of 'stretching' possibilities rather than enabling a single position to be taken (196-7). He has described 'an extreme changeability of affective moments, a rapid modification, into shimmer' (101) which can result, I think, in the emergence of multiple possibilities, interpretations and readings.

In their 'Introduction' to *Intellectual Birdhouse: Artistic Practice as Research*, Florian Dombois, Ute Meta Bauer, Claudia Mareis and Michael Schwab suggest that: 'Equipped with the luxury of ignoring demands for definitions, artists can transgress and thus challenge what any single narrative may project as research' (Dombois et al 2010: 10). That the editors figure their collection through the idea of a birdhouse, an open structure that allows ideas to fly in and out again, relates to their assertion (previously mentioned) that artistic research is an activity for border-crossers. This sense of mobility and openness, rather than the need to occupy ground and defend one's thesis, also relates to ideas of the inter(in)disciplinary as operating amongst fields. Dominique Viart has remarked that the contemporary project has an 'incessant dialogue with other disciplines in the human sciences' (Viart 2005: 186) but such works are, in my view, fundamentally – and powerfully – interdisciplinary, in their shifting relationships with the fields with which they engage. For Sheringham, the inter(in)disciplinary 'cuts across the distinction between the scientific and

the aesthetic, the subjective and the objective, the theoretical and the experiential' (Sheringham 2006: 190). I would add to this, that such works are simultaneously creative and critical, literary and theoretical, as in the enacted criticism that Geoff Dyer considers can be pursued through one's own creative practice; Dyer calls for a situation in which 'the distinction between imaginative and critical writing disappears' (Dyer 1998: 102).

It is just this inter(in)disciplinarity I see at work throughout Perec, in the richness, openness, mobility and multiplicity of his projects and essays. I find myself *encouraged* by the generosity of his approach; the rigorous *and* idiosyncratic investigation of his diverse curiosities gives me a permission to think seriously through practice about the subjects in which I am interested, and to find the sometimes peculiar ways in which these might be figured. He may have said that his own work was 'barely indicative of a method', but in its 'methodically unmethodical' approach he offers insights as to how contemporary researchers through practice might proceed in freeing ourselves from the straitjackets we have hitherto often accepted. That he sometimes failed in sustaining the projects in quite the way he had intended, and was willing to try new forms or to allow things to lie dormant and reemerge quite differently speaks directly to me of the messy territory of practice. For Michael Sheringham, Perec's deviation into practice causes temporary but effective suspensions of judgement, where spaces are opened in order to see what happens, and where, via a decision to work through projects, research is less likely to be achieved in a set way. Add to this the self-reflection that provides its meta-critical commentary throughout the writing and it is clearly a reflection of Janneke Wesseling's view on the distinctive quality of research in and through artistic research: 'practical action (the making) and theoretical reflection (the thinking) go hand in hand' (Wesseling 2011: 2). Ultimately in all this, it is Perec's intellectual and imaginative sociality, his desire not to stay put, or to own or colonise the idea or area he is investigating, but to move through and open up matters to others that I find so exciting as an approach to research. I've very frequently found myself borrowing Andre Breton's reported assertion that 'one publishes to find comrades', so Perec's sense of creating connections with others through what one can make and do is at the heart of my engagement with his work. In this regard I want to finish here with the last words in Perec's interview *The Work of Memory* where he remarks how he would like to re-use the name 'unaminist' (originally a twentieth-century literary movement) to describe: 'A movement that starts with yourself and goes towards others. It's what I call sympathy, a sort of projection, and at the same time an appeal' (Perec 1997: 133). Even whilst he may stay at home in familiar, everyday surroundings, Perec's generous essays and projects invite us to wander critically and imaginatively with him. Rather than attempting to stake new claims, or to expand and defend the territory of an academic thesis, his lesson in cultivating varied and mobile modes of attention generates insights able to produce multiple ways of knowing and being. I can think of no better aim for the artistic and academic work one might try to pursue.

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