

DIALOGUE

Research as Play: A Dialogue with Ryan Gander

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Dialogue between Ryan Gander and Lucy Cotter, exploring art as a form of visual thinking and playful material investigation.

Lucy Cotter: One of my first encounters with your work was a “Loose Associations” lecture performance you did in 2001, when you were at the Rijksacademie. I was really struck by how certain qualities of artistic thinking—as an own form of knowledge production—were made manifest for the public in that lecture. There was an incredible speed to your thinking, moving from one subject to another by way of images. It was a thinking *through* the visual, like flicking through image files in your brain. I’m imagining Harald Szeemann’s archives – flicking through hundreds and thousands of existing images just to think a thought, to maybe get to an image. Can you say something about the image and thinking?

Ryan Gander: I don’t know if what I’m about to say is true or not, because I can’t see how other people think. But I think that there needs to be another title for what happens in that kind of thinking. It’s not just in artists’ thinking; I think we need a new definition for the type of person who thinks like that. I don’t know what it would be, maybe an instigator or something like that. Something in an instigator’s mind happens very differently to most other people’s minds. I think the closest someone else who doesn’t think like that would get to it is if they are getting a new apartment and they’re deciding where to put the furniture then they go off into a daydream because their mind is really provoked. They are really excited and a valve opens and their imagination takes hold. “I will put the sofa over there and I will put a plant here.” I mean that’s the closest thing to the way I feel like I think ten hours a day, which is pretty exhausting. It also only happens because you train yourself to do it. It’s not some genius or something. You try to do it because you have to do it, because it’s your job.

LC: I find it quite frustrating that there is a huge amount of knowledge in that kind of seeing process, but it’s almost impossible to gather it. It seems like the only way to get it is to have that level of seeing yourself. Culturally, so much is oriented towards the linguistic. One of the things I find interesting about artistic research as a field is that there might actually be some space to take this seriously. That there is a kind of a way of knowing going on here that is valuable and that can’t be held in other forms.

RG: The first problem is belief. If you don’t think like that, people don’t think it’s possible. They don’t see it as being different to the way they think because they are not aware. So the next thing is to visually show that to people, to prove it to them. It’s a pretty difficult thing to do. I think one of the problems is that there are a lot of artists who don’t think like that. There is a post-Internet generation of artists now where the work really makes me incredibly sad. It’s very fickle and empty. References are used without understanding them or thinking about them. They are thrown about flippantly or ironically. It’s like chaos in visual language. It’s like someone screaming and it just sounds like Klingon. Nothing is being said articulately. So that’s one problem because it makes everyone disbelieve that this type of thought methodology is possible; the type you could see in the “Loose Association” lectures and other forms like that.

In the last six months I’ve been doing creative consultancy type projects for some companies, a bit like an experiment – I did something for Nike, for a large global property company, for Cambridge Council. I go into these company meetings, they tell me what they are doing and then I come up with some ideas. And

it's very very strange, because they think the ideas are extraordinary and they don't understand how I could have got to them. You see people physically shitting themselves. It makes me feel like I've taken some weird drug that they haven't taken. It's only recently that I've seen it, that in these people eyes, we do think differently than other people. When you talk about it, it sounds incredibly egomaniac, like you're talking about yourself as a superhero or something. But it's just training the mind. It's like going to the gym. The mind becomes healthy, astute, quickened.

LC: Do you think about your own art practice in relation to knowledge production, or research or thinking processes?

RG: I think of life in relation to knowledge production and research, not work. I think the point of living is to make your life as entertaining and enriching as possible. Everyone does that, not matter what they are doing. They go on holidays, they go to the pub, they build an extension on their house, they add a conservatory, they try to get a better job. My thinking about work is to not think of it as work, just to think of it like that, like a full life. Some of my works are offcuts or by-products or fallouts of that kind of living. There are a lot of things I make that people don't see. Like the really shitty eggcups I just made for home. Some of them have a natural affinity to become objects of art or vessels for stories for a wider public to consume. But a lot of it doesn't. Making someone a present is as creative as making an artwork. Everything you do *could* be an artwork—the bench in my garden.

LC: So why then do pieces like “A Lamp Made by the Artist for his Wife” creep into the gallery space? Was it because you made so many attempts that you thought, “Some of this has to be art”?

RG: Good question. Because I decided! (*both laugh*) I think the decision to make some things artworks and leave others in your personal world is just based on the alignment of the stars and what's happening. It seemed a funny time to do that because there were so many furniture designers who were attempting to make unique objects that were commodities with stylistic characteristic of themselves, like artworks. So it was funny to reverse the cycle.

LC: Your work is conceptual but you think through the materials. There is also a kind of playfulness in how your way of thinking comes together materially. Looking at works like “A Lamp Made by the Artist for his Wife”, I have the feeling that you're trying to get into the brains of people who can't think like that and lead them through that—a kind of initiation into materiality.

RG: Again it sounds really egocentric, but it's not materiality, it's just thinking. I know exactly what you mean, but I see the same thing with everything. Seeing a cigarette stump on the ground with lipstick on it, on a street corner outside a bar and instantly, without knowing that you are doing it, you associate it with the fact that there's been a woman outside a bar waiting for someone to turn up. She doesn't want to go inside because she doesn't want to be in a bar on her own. Most people just walk past it. I don't know what the chemistry or biology is behind it, but I visualise it as a valve in your brain. Sometimes the valve is open so you read all the systems and signifiers around you and can be super aware of everything—like in “The Matrix” — and sometimes you can just be watching “You've Got Talent” and you don't see anything other than what is in front of you, what you're told to see, it's merely retinal. I try to keep the valve open. Materiality is one of those things, because a lot of clues to narrative and clues to meaning are in the physical world, in physical objects. Everything you understand about the social, the cultural, the historical, all of the connotations and references and links to meaning are in the physical. Those things you see, you see physically, like “It is a cigarette”. The story comes from your knowledge. Essentially the cigarette is the signifier.

LC: Someone who makes things knows that making is another way of thinking or that it's all thinking actually, as you put it. While you are making things, something happens in the process. The actual thing you are making with gives you ideas. Can you talk about how that works for you in your practice?

RG: I think it's hard to explain process because my thinking is that if you have process, then it's all over. If you have a way of making work then you know what you're doing and by definition art is about exploration, trying things out, pushing things forward, making mistakes. Make a fool of yourself and try not to repeat anything you have done before. The methodology of that way of working always has to change; you always have to remain light on your feet.

The problem with process is that you make something that's successful, you're happy with it and it's interesting. And then you think, I'll follow the same route. I'll use the same process but with a different material, or in a different colour or a different size or I'll make a hundred or I will make it so that people can touch it, or I'll make it and put it on the floor or I'll make it and put it outside or I'll make it and hang it off the ceiling. And actually you're just making the same thing, although you think you're making another work. But you're not making a new work. Then you end up with what we traditionally know as practice. Traditional practice is repetition. And in my mind, repetition is stuttering and is against the definition of what art should be. People still talk about practice like that, but that's historical practice. Practice is not like that any more. The idea is to get better. It's a trajectory that moves over two or three decades. I think that's what you can call practice, not being an artist that follows the same steps again and again and again, just making casts of the inside of different objects or video's dot paintings... I'm not critiquing other artists when I say that, 95% of contemporary artists work like this.

My dad's idea of what an artist is, is that every day they would wake up and invent something new. Some things would be terrible and they wouldn't work and some things would be amazing and everyone would think they were great. I think he has the right understanding of what an artist's role is and what practice is. It's really great to make bad stuff, I don't want to make good things all the time because it's not true and you don't learn anything.

LC: You don't work in repetition but you do work in series. I find it problematic in much of exhibition making that you often get one piece presented on its own like a genius piece. But I find you have to see most works in series. Even though you don't want to see the process, you want to get some idea of a thinking process, of what the artist was trying to make happen, which usually unfolds across a body of work. I'm thinking for example about your "Tell My Mother Not to Worry" works, where you deliberately produced a whole series of works along the style of "I had a very good idea, let's do a hundred of them." If I only saw one of those works it would have a completely different effect on me. It would turn the work into something precious—a kind of classical sculpture meets surrealism. But when you see a number of them, it becomes something totally different— a curiosity about form behind that sheet, what it means when something becomes physical or massive that is normally fleeting. Can you say something about how the mind works across those pieces? It is different than having one idea. There is something there that is not quite process, but something else.

RG: Yes, like you said there isn't only one way of making works. Some works are "genius" pieces, like the wind work at Documenta [13]. If I had produced a series of six wind works, then they would be about me being metaphysical; pretending to be Jesus or something. So that work has to stand alone. You are totally right about why other works are in series, because they unravel something about consistent thinking. So, for example, the ghosts and the dens are series because they are about development and education. They are about my daughter growing physically and intellectually. From number one to number ten, you see the ghosts changing height. There might be more dens because they keep getting bigger, architecturally and conceptually more complicated. That's what I'm trying to show— firstly the power of imagination with naivety. Where you climb under a table and throw a sheet over it and you say it's a house. When I do that with my daughter, she says "It's a house" and then I say, "It's a house". But for her it *really* is a house; everything changes into a house, her imagination is on fire. Whereas for me it's a *house* but it's actually really still just a table with a sheet thrown over it.

LC: I want to ask you something else about repetition and about process. I really loved the *Ampersand* (2012–13) work you first showed at Palais de Tokyo. You say that you don't believe in process, but the *Ampersand* work is a moment when you allow your collecting habit to come to the fore. In my experience collecting is one of those things that many artists do that they don't talk about much, but that's an indirect form of research and actually at the core of what they make. I'm not going to pre-empt anything by asking you something specific, but can you perhaps say something about collecting?

RG: Mike Nelson once told me that he'd just bought a house. His new house had a really shitty floor in it and he wanted an oak floor. He produced an exhibition that used loads of oak beams because he knew that when the show was over it would all be scrapped, because his works are incredibly hard to sell and to store. He knew he could take the oak and have it cut into nice floorboards and have it laid in his house. So there was a sort of upcycling to it. In the economy of art there is a kind of economy of means, not just selling work for money to make more work. I'm really interested in that. I swap a lot of artworks for watches—I collect watches. *Ampersand* was an excuse for me to gather a lot of things together that I wouldn't have the time to

gather otherwise. There are things in there like the Cory Arcangel work that we had to fabricate—it's a copy. Then there is an M9 Leica camera that I have always wanted to own but could never pay the extortionate amount of money for. Then there were things that were really dear to me that I wouldn't want to give up, like a blanket my wife made for me one Christmas—a huge patchwork that was sewn together from panels of old men's jumpers and woollen cardigans she bought in charity shops.

So again it was more a part of life than a part of art. I didn't start out thinking, "I'm going to make a collection, it will be on display as well and I'm going to write a book about it". I thought, "If I was a collector and I could collect anything, not just art, what would I collect?" And then you collect air from the beach in Dunwich because Dunwich is really submerged under the water. That's how it started. Then I thought it would probably be a really interesting thing to look at. I soon realised that the reasons I was choosing these things were more important than the objects themselves, so I decided it would be a book. I went to San Francisco for three weeks and quietly wrote about half of it there and the other half I wrote commuting between Suffolk and London.

LC: I mentioned in another dialogue with Liam Gillick that artists' thinking is often associative, but it's not random association. Your term "loose association" comes closer to describing it. Looking through the multiple associations you make in *Ampersand*, one can see that everything circles back somehow, like lines being drawn across the objects. In the exhibition that followed the book, the viewer got to sit on a retro Eames-style leather armchair and watch these things go by on a conveyer belt and make these associations themselves. It is like a very physical slideshow.

RG: Yes, one of the first things that becomes apparent is that usually you move around exhibitions and here the exhibition was brought to you. Like some sort of ga-ga of physical language, the spectator was still. Like the Internet and everything else with speed at the moment, these things passed in front of you. It didn't give you time to think about them, which was also important. In that sense it was like a "Loose Associations" lecture and that speed that you mentioned at the beginning of this conversation was present. It was almost like a prelude to the scroll generation, where you are already presented the next thing before you have even thought about the thing you are looking at. That kind of presentation is all consuming and quite exhausting. It makes you feel very alive in a way, because it makes you feel how full the world is and what human culture has given us.

It was also quite like a "Loose Associations" lecture because there were lots of associations between the objects. So, for example, there were fridge magnets on the refrigerator that I'd made from a typeface that I'd invented that was taken from the handwriting of Spike Milligan. (I was doing these fridge magnets for my daughter when I realised that they were just some generic typeface but that she was making up words that didn't exist. It seemed logical that they should be in the handwriting of someone who really invented words.) On the refrigerator there was a French cell phone number written using these fridge magnets. So you had this notion of inventing words in a word-inventor's handwriting. But then there was this phone number and if you called the phone number, the Nokia phone passing by on the conveyor belt would ring. The Nokia phone played *Gran Vals*, the Nokia theme tune that is based on a piece of classical music [by Francesco Tárrega] called *Grand Vals*. They got around the copyright by dropping the last note. So it's an exact copy of the music originally played by a string quartet. So I had the Nokia theme tune re-recorded, played by a classical guitarist, and had it put on a polyphonic ring tone. So that's one example, there were a lot of links between the objects. There was a security mirror that went around. Thirty objects later, you'd see the reverse of a security mirror. It's endless, really, the amount of associations. So really, it was like an association lecture made physical.

LC: It sounds like a mad encyclopedia, an encyclopedia that internalises instead of externalises somehow.

RG: It doesn't feel like that because it's my mind. *(both laugh)*.

LC: Well if we're going to talk about artists' minds, I have to write an introductory essay for this book and I was tempted to make the first sentence, "The most intelligent people I have ever met are artists." Because when you scrape away all that respect and admiration for artists, a lot of people think that artists are not that intelligent, even though they are creative, expressive, imaginative etc. etc. I am serious about wanting to communicate the fact that there is a certain kind of intelligence in art that is trained. And it really makes something happen.

RG: But not all artists, though.

LC: *(Both laugh)* No, not all artists. I should qualify that statement.

RG: I think that's the biggest problem at the moment for me. Something I shouldn't really worry about. I've got children, I've got parents, I've got shows I have to do and a car to have MOT'ed. But I worry about some little pseudo pop punk from L.A. spraying "Hardcore" on a wall. It's like I can't morally and ethically function in a world that lets bad practice like that through the sieve. It's the thing I worry about most. I think it's because I function in this world. And you have to have a certain amount of belief and faith in that world to function in it.

LC: One of the reasons I find artistic research interesting as a possibility is that it makes space for intelligence, for more depth, for trying to get away from an "I'm trying to get loads of shows" mentality into "Well there really is something going on with art. There really is something there, there always has been, and there is now." Art has to be placed differently. There has to be some kind of a sieve where you can try and get some of the nuggets out and actually see the difference. In a way it's about getting away from a lightweight approach to art. I think that's partly by zooming out and extending the frame. I don't want to hold hands with academia to the point where we're all kissing, but by making some connection to a thinking world as opposed to an art market, maybe you can make more space for caring and actually following this possibility; the potential that's there for something interesting to happen.

RG: Yeah, but in an ideal world – I'm just writing down something you said because I'm stealing it as a title – In an ideal world, all that thin stuff wouldn't be called art. It would just have a different name, like Athena Poster Shop.

Ryan Gander (Chester, 1976) has exhibited worldwide with recent solo exhibitions at Remai Modern, Saskatoon (2017), the National Museum of Art, Osaka (2017) and Hyundai Gallery, Seoul (2017). His solo exhibition *Make Every Show Like It's Your Last* at Manchester City Art Gallery (2014) travelled to the Centre for Contemporary Art, Derry, Aspen Art Museum, USA; Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver and MAC, Montreal. He has participated in the Sydney Biennale (2017), British Art Show (2015), Shanghai Biennale (2012); dOCUMENTA 13, Kassel (2012); ILLUMInations, 54th Biennale di Venezia, Venice (2011); 55th Carnegie International, Pittsburgh (2008) and the Sydney Biennial (2008). Gander has received the Zürich Art Prize (2009), the ABN Amro Art Price (2006), the Baloise Art Statements of the Art Basel (2006) and the Dutch Prix de Rome (2003). In 2017 he was awarded an OBE for services to contemporary arts. He has taught at Goldsmiths, the Royal Academy of Art, London and the University of Huddersfield and holds an honorary PhD from the Manchester Metropolitan University.

Lucy Cotter is an independent writer and curator whose practice explores contemporary art's relationship with aesthetics, politics and the unknown. She was curator of the Dutch pavilion of the 57th Venice Biennale 2017, presenting *Cinema Olanda* with artist Wendelien van Oldenborgh. www.lucycotter.org/.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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