

Art as Knowledge

IA1: Investigation – inquiry phase 1

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Summary

This investigation is a conceptual response to the river walk lead by artist, Jacqueline Scotcher. The personal memories that resurfaced during my experience lead to a broader inquiry of how human experiences can be captured in art. Analysis of key artists, Charwei Tsai and Nick Verstand, through personal and contemporary contexts reveal how human experiences can be visualised through behaviour of materials and data collection. My focus will explore how audience interaction can enhance meaning.

INQUIRY
PHASE 1

How can artists capture human experiences
through interaction with materials?

Introduction

This investigation is in response to the river walk and workshop lead by artist, Jacqueline Scotcher. During the walk, I became aware of how the spaces around the river acted as a hub for human activity, and recalled personal memories of the river. I broadened these ideas of human activity and memories into my inquiry of how an artist can visualise human experiences. Two key artists influencing my investigation are Charwei Tsai and Nick Verstand. Both informed my experimentation as to how non-physical concepts can be expressed using motion and interaction with materials. My experimental responses are mostly videos where I am manipulating the natural behaviours of water, ink and watercolour, and integrating sound to provide further meaning. I have learnt that motion can be used to show artist interaction, while collected data can be transformed into a visible representation of human experiences.

Key Artist 1

Taiwanese artist, Charwei Tsai, uses film to capture the interaction between her hand's movement and the natural movement of materials. Her artworks are personal, as Buddhist concepts are infused in all her works, as well as being a portrayal of her cultural identity (Ocula, n.d.). A main theme of Tsai's works is the Buddhist concept of emptiness, where the term, rather than having negative connotations of nothingness, refers to how our perceived reality is ultimately transitory and interdependent on nature. She draws inspiration from this concept's explanation by Buddhist monk and humanitarian, Matthieu Ricard in his book *Altruism*: "By understanding how much our physical existence [...] depends on others and in what the external world provides us, [...] it grows easier to put ourselves in the place of others, to wish for their happiness [...]" (Julius, n.d.)

I am focusing on Tsai's video art, in particular, *Circle II* 2011 (Figure 1), a 40-second video starting with the artist painting a circle of ink onto a melting block of ice. The line of ink bleeds out and flows outwards as the ice melts, eventually disappearing altogether (QAGOMA, n.d.). The physical, yet ephemeral nature of the dispersing ink channels the fundamental message of the Heart Sutra, 'Form is empty, emptiness is form'. The ink completely dissipates to reveal the clear, white ice beneath, further developing the concept of emptiness, where a meditative state of nonsuffering follows one's acceptance of universal interdependence and harmony with nature. Audiences are reminded of natural cycles in the infinite geometry of a circle and the transient nature of water moving through states of matter. The black ink staining the ice is suggestive of impurities of life, so it is cleansing to watch as it slowly melts away. The artist's hand included within the frame makes the interaction between artist and artwork visible, as though the viewer can physically see Tsai achieve peace of mind.

Tsai demonstrates how motion expressed by film can show direct interaction between artist and artwork, which assists my investigation of methods I can use to show artist presence. I have drawn on the way Tsai manipulates water's natural behaviour and captures a sense of time via video, visualising artist intention, specifically commentary on universal interconnectedness and impermanence. Through this research, I have been inspired to develop a personalised definition of change, and explore water and ink as a medium in my experimental portfolio.

Key Artist 2

Contemporary artist, Nick Verstand researches human perception through audio-visual installations, using technology to blur the line between the material and immaterial. The highly interactive nature of his works, many requiring the public to become part of the installation, aims to break down the walls of social boundaries in a collaborative feedback loop between artist, artwork and audience. Verstand is incredibly effective at creating a simultaneously fascinating and introspective ambience through innovative lighting manipulations and hypnotic surround sounds. He has stated Anthony McCall's Solid Light Works as an influence for using light as a medium (*AURA - Nick Verstand*, n.d.).

AURA 2017 (Figure 2) transforms the audience's own emotions into perceptible light compositions of different colours. It accomplishes this through the metamorphosis of data collected from wearable biosensors, which register individuals' 'brainwaves, heart-rate variability, and galvanic skin response', into light (*AURA - Nick Verstand*, n.d.). The slow, undulating pulse of light resembles a heartbeat or the rising-falling sequence of breathing, creating a calming atmosphere. The way in which the light is projected from a single point on the ceiling and cascades outwards is reminiscent of sunlight filtering down from the water surface; or perhaps it is suggestive of a curtain catching a breeze. Regardless, there is a sense of isolation from the world, allowing for personal reflection, although the transparent light maintains a visible connection with others. *AURA* explores how physical manifestation of emotions influences how we understand ourselves and others. This returns to Verstand's overarching theme of dissolving social boundaries, especially in an age where technology creates a physical disconnect between individuals.

My investigation into Verstand's installations has revealed that aspects of the human experience can be manifested using technology, specifically audio, light projections, and the collection of data. I have been inspired to explore the physics of sound, and how manipulating and capturing the physical impact of invisible forces can be used to make something non-physical seem tangible.

Experimentation

My initial response to the stimulus resulted in *Untitled* (Figure 3) in which students were encouraged to imitate Scotcher's art making process. Pastels mixed with binder medium were used to paint on canvas, focusing on shape, colour and hidden meaning. In my response, I created an abstract landscape alluding to boats and the river, then cut it up and rearranged it so the lines formed a circle. This idea ties to my research of Tsai and implementing ideas of natural cycles and universal connectedness, which lead to a secondary response. I left a mandala made of stones on the oval, letting nature and human activity disrupt it. *Infuse* (Figure 4) is the result of documenting the changes over a week. I liked the outcome, but was uncomfortable with the uncertainty of the process, so I focused on water as a medium.

Inspired by Verstand's use of data, I sent a survey to my classmates containing three questions related to human experience: Do you like change? Any comments about life? And have you recently felt like the world is against you? I recorded myself saying the responses and edited the audio so the responses overlapped. This creates individualised interpretations, where separate individuals may pay attention to different key words amidst the entangled speech. Videos were created to match each question.

From the responses to the first question, the six words that appeared most frequently were input into an online word-to-colour converter. Watercolour was used to mix these colours, which were then frozen. *Change* (Figure 5) mimics *Circle*, as I filmed the frozen watercolours change state, melting and pooling together, while audio about change is played.

I focused on sound in *Life* (Figure 6) by playing the audio from a speaker with a container of water placed on top. The experience of life can be represented physically by filming the visualisation of sound waves as water ripples. This idea could be refined by using a louder speaker and placing objects in the container to produce more dramatic and complex ripples.

Overcome (Figure 7) is deeply personal as there is a focused on individual struggles and perspectives. I played the audio while dropping black ink into a container of water whenever I heard an influx in negativity. However, to reflect how 'overcome' can be interpreted both negatively and positively, the video was reversed, depicting the ink slowly receding to reveal clear water.

Conclusion

My investigation has revealed that it is difficult to show complex concepts such as the human experience solely through artist interaction with materials. Instead, key artists, Charwei Tsai and Nick Verstand, demonstrate that meaning can be shown through manipulating the behaviour of materials and forces such as water, heat and sound. Tsai has been especially influential towards my use of video in order to capture meaning through movement and change, while Verstand inspired a contemporary approach through collecting data and using audio to establish artist intention. Finally, an aspect of Verstand's installations that took my interest was the high level of audience involvement, a concept I would like to explore further. I thoroughly enjoyed utilising a survey, and felt like I created an opportunity for my classmates to vent their frustrations.

Focus

Instead of artist interaction, my focus will explore the how audience interactions with the artwork can be utilised to create or enhance meaning, examined through a contemporary and personal context. I aim to research into different ways technology can be incorporated into art and develop an engaging relationship between audience, artwork and artist.

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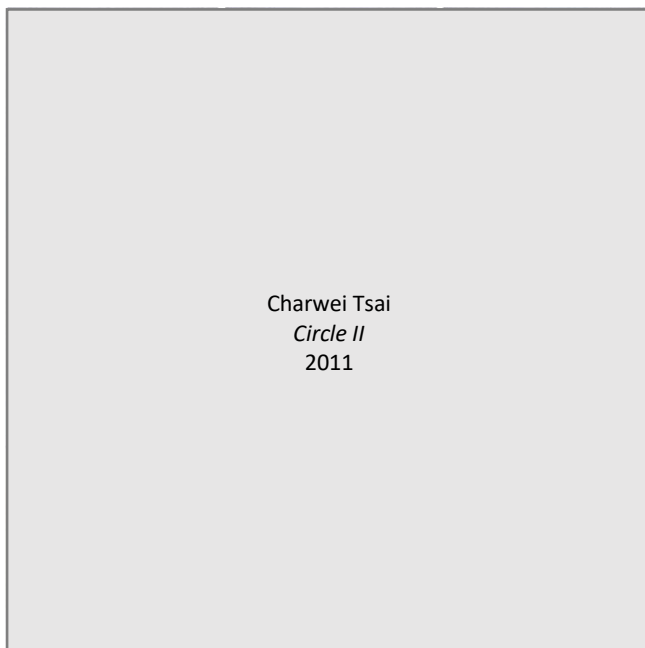


Figure 1
Charwei Tsai,
Circle II
2011

Digital video, 56 seconds (stills)

can be viewed at *Charwei Tsai* on
YouTube:

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2S
WHs Unb6QQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2SWHsUnb6QQ)

Figure 2
Nick Verstand,
AURA
2017

Biosensors, lasers, hazer, speaker system (stills)
15x15x6 meters

can be viewed at *Studio Nick Verstand*:
<http://www.nickverstand.com/projects/aura/>

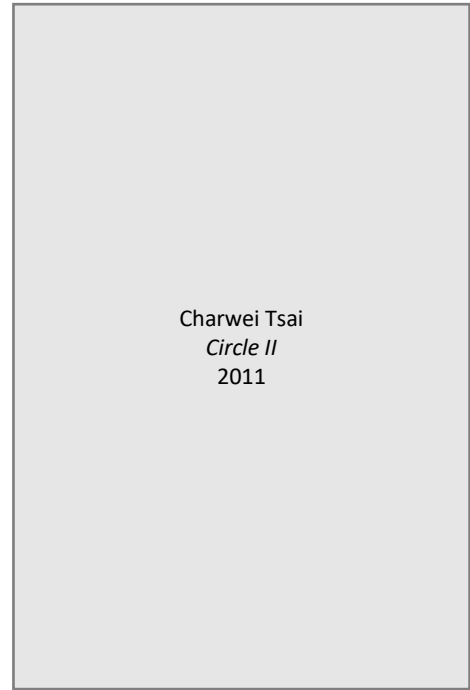


Figure 3
Untitled

Experimental artwork



Figure 4
Infuse

Experimental sculpture





Figure 5
Change

Experimental video (stills)



Word-to-colour generator

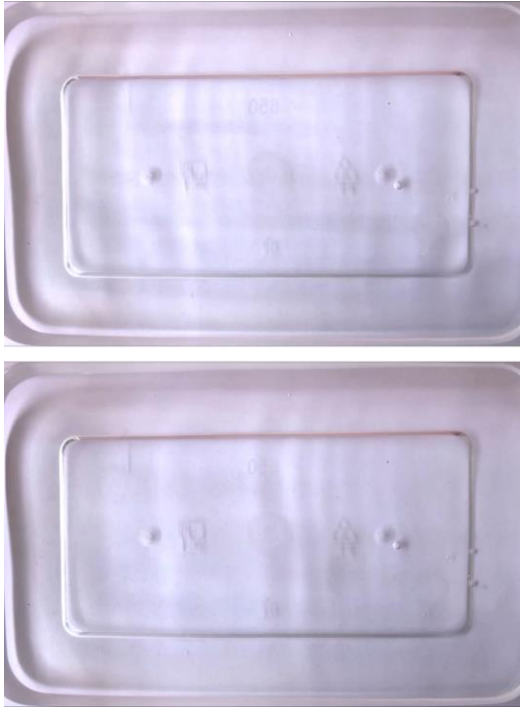


Figure 6
Life

Experimental video (stills)

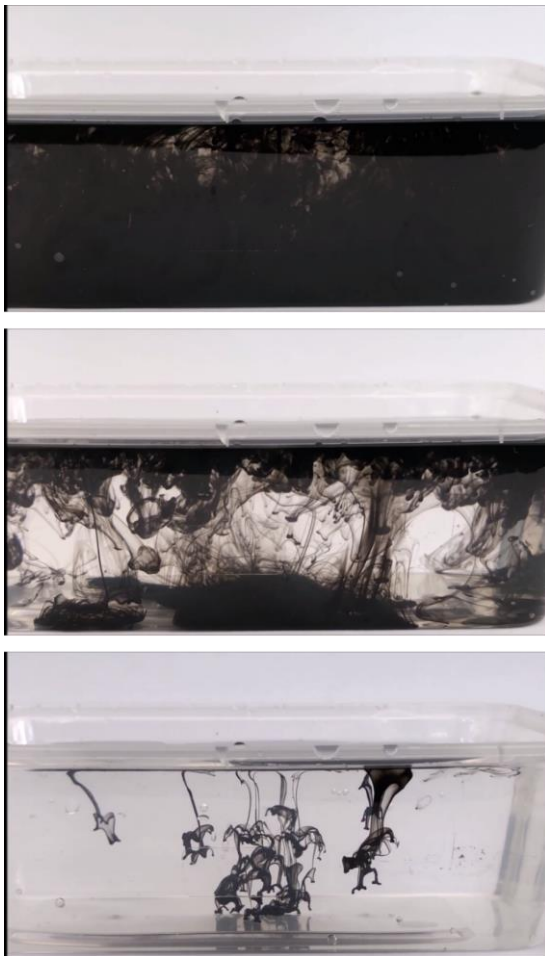


Figure 7
Overcome

Experimental video (stills)

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