

# **Where the Sky Widens**

**An exploration of slow making and spatially-aware prototypes as methods for considering emotional connections to distant places**

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## Foreword

The practical component of this research project centred on the design and use of paper ‘pods’ supplemented with computational processing and electronics to make them react with movement and light to being pointed in a particular direction.

I ran workshops with different groups of people and we used the time it took participants to make the pods to talk about the distant places to which we have strong emotional connections. We worked and talked at the pace of folded tabs and PVA glue—4 or 5 hours—giving us time to share stories; consider our relationships to our pasts, to people, and to places; and also to question the implications of crafting our own interfaces for digital technologies.

After having selected a location that was of significance to them, participants then had time to walk with the pod they had made, now programmed to signal when person and pod were facing towards that place.

The workshops were held with members of the public at Birmingham Open Media; Visual Sociology staff and students at Goldsmiths, University of London; and with staff and researchers connected to the Centre for Mobilities Research and Lancaster Institute for the Contemporary Arts at Lancaster University. Two further workshops had been planned, but were not realised.

Rather than describing the pods and workshops in detail, the following chapters are intended to complement the practical work through exploration of my practice, indicating relevant contextual frameworks and evaluation of the research project as a whole.







Figure 1. *Frames and abstraction: landscape viewed from the car.*



Figure 2. *Although comparable in size, the affordances of car and tent as places in which to dwell are very different. One a solid shell, albeit with windows that can be wound up and down; the other a fragile, dynamic system that must be constantly monitored and adjusted in response to subtleties and threats from the environment.*

## Chapter 1: An Arrival Story

My arrival at the campsite also marked a sensory transition. For the last few hours I'd been sat in my car, travelling *through* the landscape but not being *a part of it*. I could see my surroundings progressing through the frame of the windscreen, but these were not places I felt I was *in* (figure 1).

As much as we might be attending to traffic conditions or contemplating our final destination, the 'carcoon' (Wickham, 2006) often marks the perimeter of our sensory field in terms of touch, smell and hearing<sup>1</sup>. Until bladder or stiff muscles make their presence felt, the 'me' making the journey mostly consists of the space behind the eyes.

Thus it was with relief that I unfolded myself from the seat and found myself back in my body again: relocated to a hillside in Shropshire and willing to disregard the process by which I had travelled<sup>2</sup>. Inhaling air that had not previously been circulated through vents, feeling sunlight that had not been filtered through a lens of toughened glass. Next I was beating the bounds of four different fields trying to anticipate the extents to which I would be vulnerable to landscape, weather, fauna and flora in a variety of micro-environments (figure 2).

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1 For contrasting analyses of sensory travel environments, see Cook and Edensor (2014), Jones (2012) and Jungnickel and Aldred (2014) [with reference to cycling] and Macpherson (2009) [with reference to walking].

2 See Ingold (2004) for discussion of affluent Eighteenth Century European travellers "skimming across the surface of the country" and, as a counterpoint, Edensor (2003) describing how the mundane space-time of a regular motorway commute can be experienced as a space that fosters imaginative connections rather than one that is asocial and desensitizing.



*Figure 3. After about half an hour and several repositionings of the minibus anchor, the hot air balloon was finally airborne; vertical and lateral distances travelled to be determined by an interplay of forces of which I am sadly ignorant.*



*Figure 4. Experiencing landscape whilst simultaneously being a body on the ground and a marker on a map.*

I wasn't the only person mindful of terrain and meteorology that evening. As I made camp after my perambulation I became aware of a hot air balloon partially inflated on the crest of the hill behind me (figure 3).

In her doctoral thesis, artist and researcher Jen Southern writes at length about the differing perspectives of being-in-flight, being-on-the-ground and also the hybrid perspectives afforded by geolocating social networking services. As an example of the latter she discusses the pervasive 'blue dot' marker now familiar to many from mapping software and GPS-enabled smartphones, and how that is experienced in combination with the "embodied eye-level perspective of being on the ground" (Southern, 2013). From here she argues that separating aerial perspectives (constructed as being removed from the lived world) and everyday life on the street is becoming increasingly problematic; that nowadays "locative media with map-based interfaces allow the user to both 'read' the city from above and to act within it, and thus write it, simultaneously" (Southern, 2013) (figure 4).

I am camped on this hillside to spend a devoted amount of time exploring how spatially-aware objects I have made affect my relationship to landscape, as I both dwell<sup>3</sup> in and traverse it. At a basic level, these devices function to give an alert whenever they are orientated towards the place where I was born. With the tent pitched, the bedding unrolled and the hot air balloon disappeared in the distance, the time has come to switch one on. Once powered up, I slowly rotate it around a vertical axis, 'scanning' for a response.

For all my paying attention to place, I don't really have any idea of where I am or what direction I may be facing, so there's a genuine and profound sense of revelation that comes with the signal that it's over there.

Southampton is that way.

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3 In this particular context I especially enjoy the Oxford dictionary's entry for 'dwell' which informs me the word's roots are related to the Middle Dutch 'dwellen' meaning 'stun, perplex'. I am here in the hills to ask as many questions as I answer.



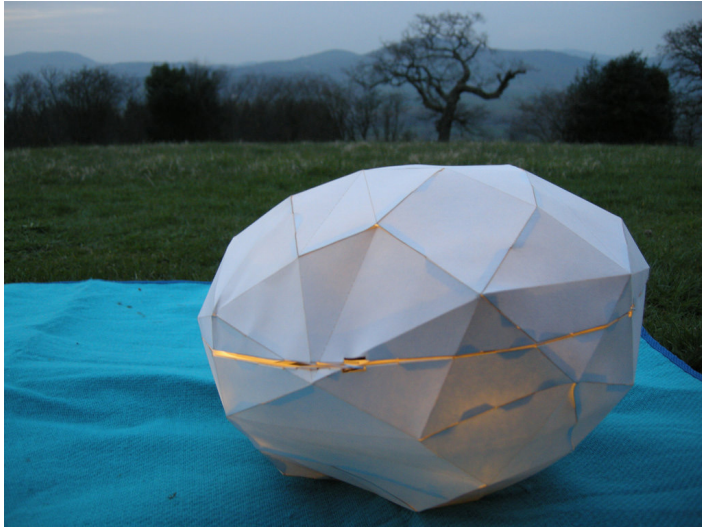
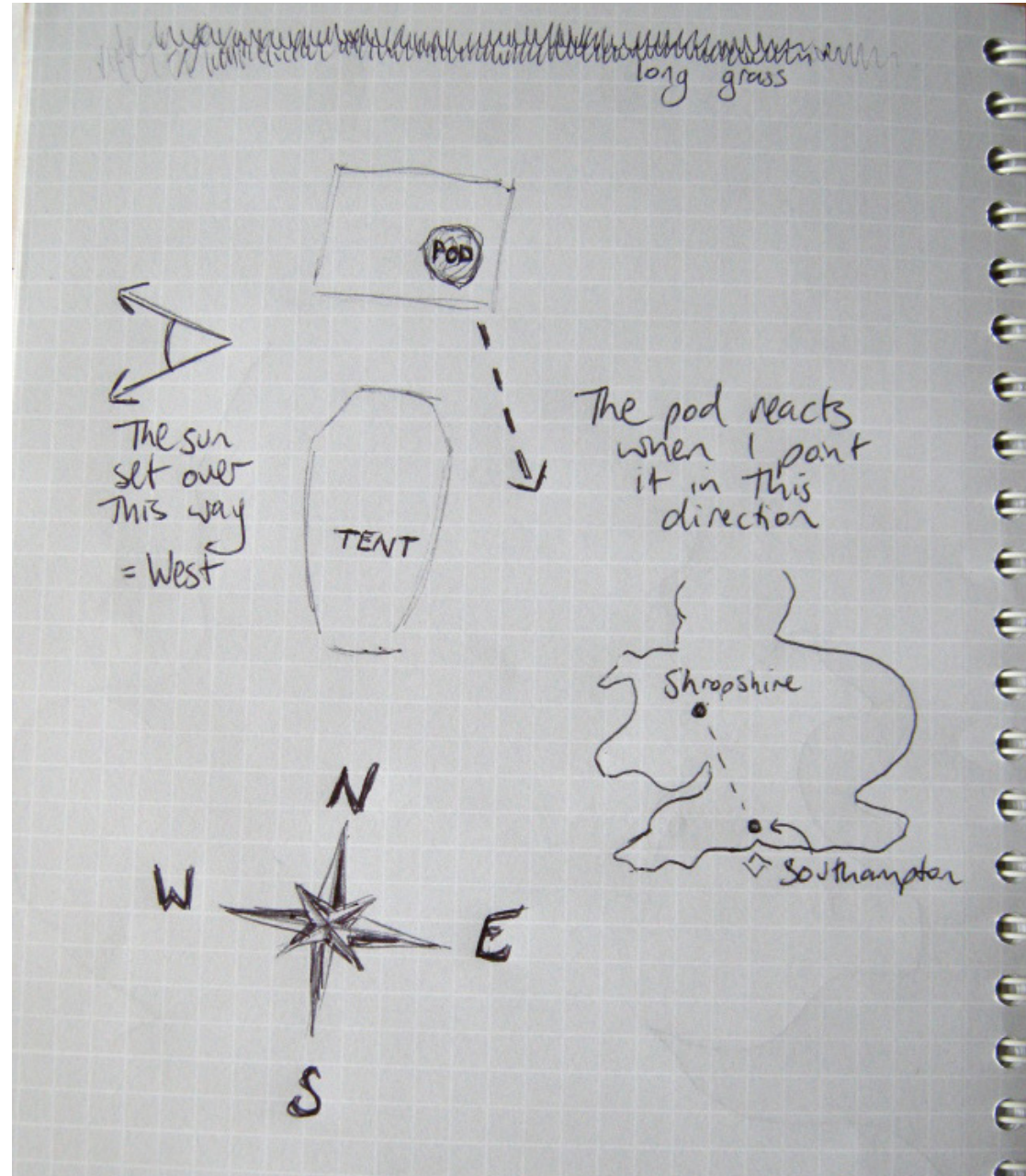
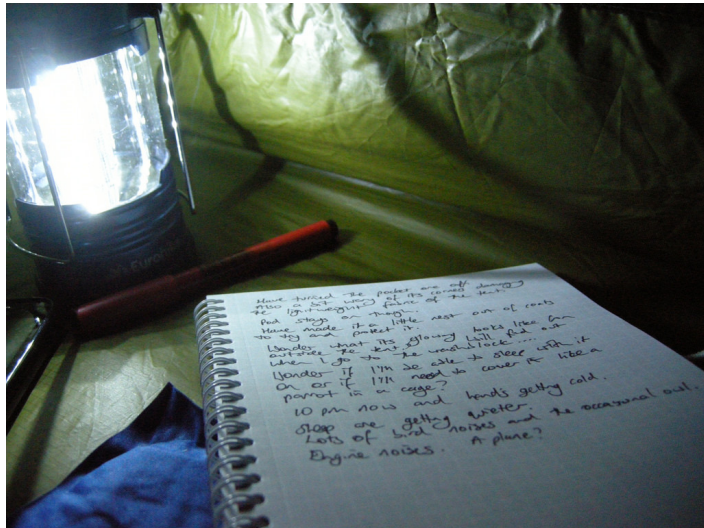


Figure 5. The spatially-aware pod and the mind's-eye construction I use to locate myself whilst being sat in this field: "a weird hybrid of view-from-above, view-from-the-ground, Naughty Elephants Squirt Water and remembering where the sun had set" (Pugh, 2015).





Later that evening, having watched the sun set in the West and holding an approximate map of the United Kingdom in my mind's eye, I am able to estimate the bearing from Shropshire to Hampshire and construct a positioning of myself in relation to the points of the compass. This is my hybrid reading of a view from above and my rooted, embodied presence on the ground (figure 5).

My pod's task is to remain switched on and alert to its relationship to Earth's magnetic field and to the radio waves from the constellation of Global Positioning System (GPS) satellites orbiting above the planet.

My task is to remain switched on and alert to my relationship to the pod, to the landscape around me and to places distant from my current location (figure 6).



Figure 6. Taking my cue from reading about ethnographic practices, this was the first time I had used the making of field notes as a data source and integral part of a project.



## Chapter 2: Another Arrival Story

I joined this MA because I wanted to get a better understanding of where my practice sits in relation to different areas of research and critical writing. This was linked to three main aims:

- to get a better understanding of the theory, issues, debates, conversations and contexts towards which I might want to steer my practice (i.e. to make changes in the nature of my practice)
- to improve how I articulate my practice (i.e. to make changes in the way I talk about my practice)
- to help me to articulate my practice to different audiences (i.e. to make changes to whom I talk about my practice)

I'd reached a point where I was feeling a gap in my practice. I'd got reasonably far with the praxis aspect—getting settled in with an area of investigation and with modes of going about it—but at the same time being aware that I was struggling to frame and explain what I do, or to find a space in which it had a community or a purpose to resonate with.

This final module was designed to test my relationship with different contexts for my practice; ways of framing my methods and my outcomes that are outside of the habits and comfort zones that I have settled into over the last 11 years of being a practicing artist. This module was intended as an opportunity for me to feel what it is like to engage with those different contexts through rolling up my sleeves and immersing myself in them. I wanted to know where my work gets amplified, where my enthusiasm gets sparked and where the useful friction points are:

“It is through embodied relations with the world, tacitly understood, that we accrue practical knowledge.”  
(O’Conner, 2007)

It’s possible that I could arrive at some of these insights and conclusions from a process of reading and writing, however I also want my decisions to be informed by things outside of texts: by the knot in my stomach when I instinctively recoil from a suggestion or by the buzz when ideas collide and people start to riff off each other.

## Chapter 3: Where the Sky Widens

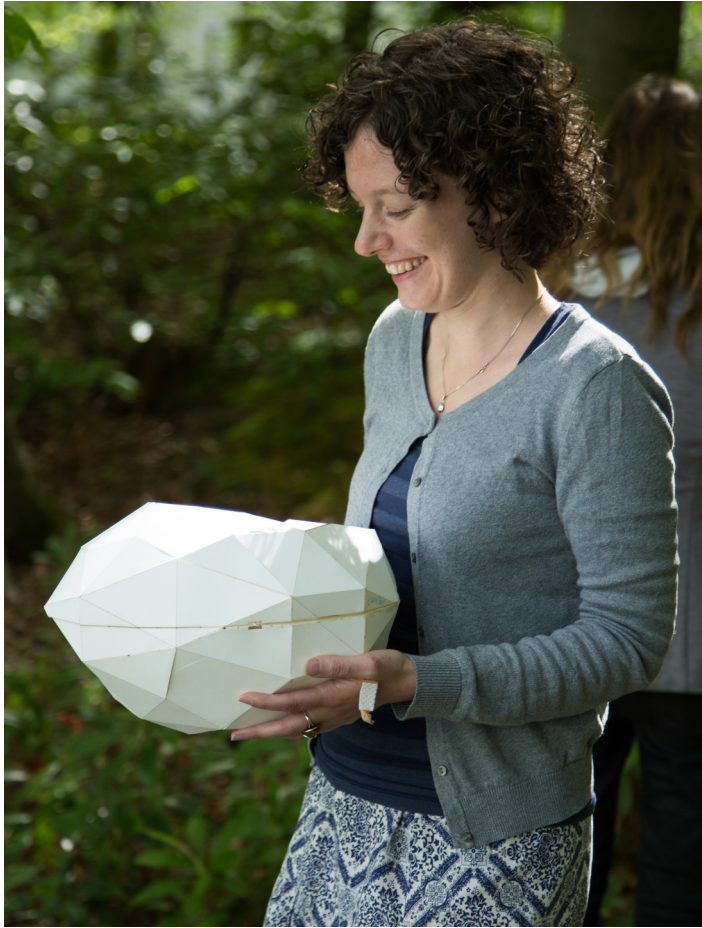
The spatially-aware pods introduced in the first chapter—or more specifically the workshops they were designed to be used within—were intended to provide the framework for my questioning of my practice.

Figures 7 and 8 give an overview of how the finished pods are used and how they work. This type of device (thing) is something I regularly employ as a device (method) along with guided tours, playfulness and exploration to invite participants to experience their surroundings in slightly different ways. Often I'm trying to foreground elements of the environment that would otherwise likely go unconsidered, or I'm providing a means by which people can sense the world in an altered manner. In both cases the embodied experience is of foremost importance to me and, for this reason, my use of digital technology is rooted in physical computing<sup>4</sup> and in sculptural interfaces that must be worn or carried.

These pods differ from my usual approach in that I intend to use them to provoke consideration of distant places rather than of immediate surroundings. However, it remains that the most important thing for me is not the technology itself, but rather the experiences and interactions that it can catalyse. The system I use is a somewhat crude way of achieving something that is *just functional enough* for people to hang stories and emotions off. I am interested in the conversations that can happen through them, what the effects are of using them and the way they can act as a springboard for imagining scenarios. For that reason, here I deliberately refrain from going into more detail about the technology driving the pods and their construction.

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4 Physical computing involves systems of software and hardware that can sense and respond to the physical world, often taking as its starting point the human body and its capabilities.



*Figure 7. a) A participant in Lancaster walks whilst connected to a cliff-top on the Isle of Man. b) Workshop participants walk with their pods in the dark. Photos: Jonathan Kemp.*



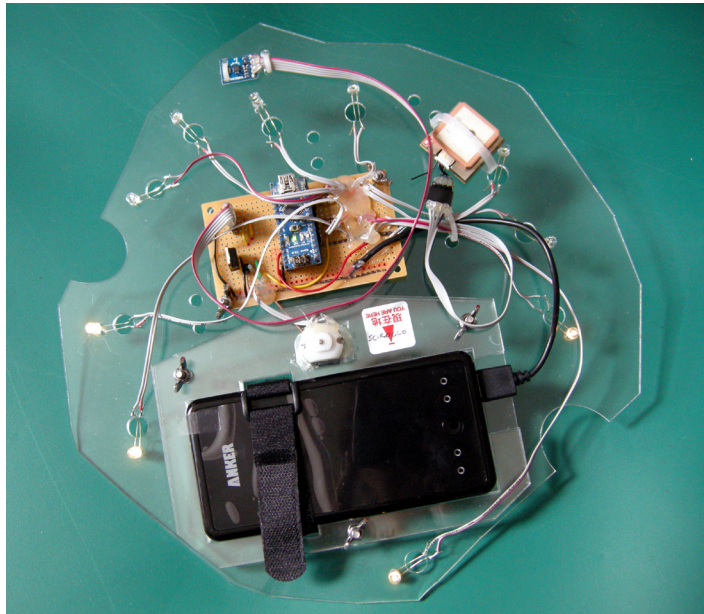
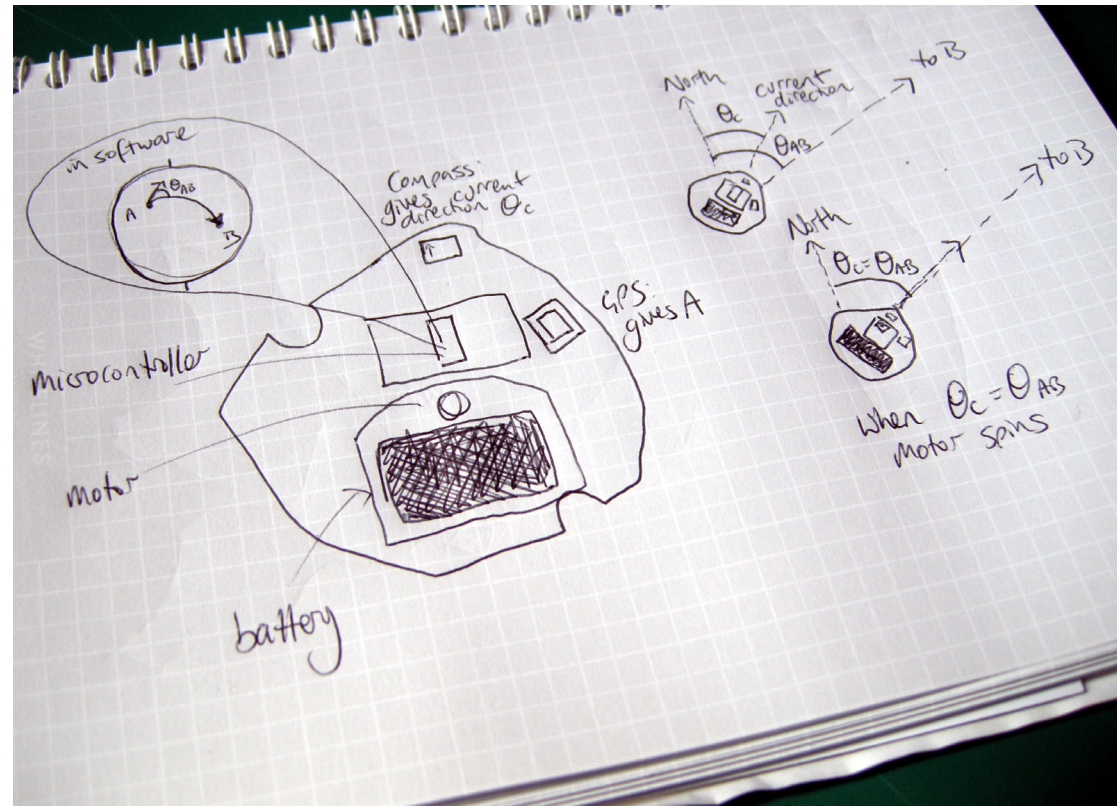


Figure 8. Within the delicate outer paper shell a microcontroller continuously monitors an electronic compass to know what direction it is currently facing relative to Magnetic North,  $\theta_C$ . The microcontroller also periodically uses GPS to get the current positional coordinates  $A$ . It can compare this information against the latitude and longitude of a selected significant place,  $B$ , to calculate the bearing between the two locations  $\theta_{AB}$ . When the direction the pod is facing tallies with the direction to the significant place ( $\theta_C = \theta_{AB}$ ) then a motor is triggered to move an eccentric weight that makes the pod wobble.

*Note:*

Microcontrollers are small programmable computers often with the ability to be connected up to various inputs and outputs. Arduino is an example of a microcontroller popular with artists (and is also the microcontroller used within this project).





*Figure 9. Pod cradled carefully in one arm I cross the threshold and venture out along this route that skirts around and across the patchwork of the county for a total of 139 miles.*

## Chapter 4: They Ploughed their Clothes into the Fields

I recently had a conversation with a stranger as we shared a table in a crowded café. She was American by birth, although she had now lived in the UK for several decades. For her, our ability to roam so much of the British countryside was a thing of wonder, and it was the stile—a simple device for crossing property boundaries—that symbolised this freedom for her.

The Shropshire Way passes along one edge of the field in which I temporarily reside and the stile in the corner invites me to undertake a journey (figure 9).

Walking with the pod makes me more attentive to the traces other walkers have left by their passing. In contrast to Ingold's (2004) observations that the technology of the boot has (in many European and North American cultures at least) turned us into surface-skimmers who leave no footprints upon our paved urban landscapes, here in the countryside I am seeking out any exposed earth or flattened grass that may yield a clue as to the route I should take (figure 10).

After I cross a little footbridge (and a stile) into a field that also has an amenable grassy bank to sit on<sup>5</sup>, I stop to eat the food that I carried with me. I intuitively select this location not only because of the convenient topography, but because there is also human activity here and, bar one woman at a garden gate, I have not yet spoken to anyone on this journey.

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<sup>5</sup> I was later to be told by a dog-walker that I was sat on the remains of a Medieval motte and bailey.





*Figure 10. Trampled grass and footprints in the soil are my waymarkers for much of the journey.*



A man is methodically staking out a series of colour-coded pegs and strings in parallel lines. Two strides apart; yellow pegs forming the right-hand edge of the channel; blue string along the left-hand edge; with red fabric ‘flags’ attached to the end pegs. He has to do this or he loses track of where he is he says. It’s because of his age, he says.

He is metal detecting.

He says he has been rastering across this field for more than two weeks now (figure 11).

We chat; as he tells me people often do when they see a metal detectorist. There are thousands of them in the UK he reckons, but this confuses lorry drivers in particular because they “drive all over the place and are high up in their cabs so they can see loads, but they never see people metal detecting” (Anon, pers. comm.). So metal detectorists are a novelty, and when people see them they stop and chat. He laments that the first question everyone always asks is “Have you found anything?” And if the answer is affirmative that the next question is always “What’s it worth?”

These are questions I deliberately avoid asking him, and instead we talk about triangulation and I tell him about William Whyte and his theory that oddball behaviours play an important function in facilitating interactions between strangers (Whyte, 1980).

He asks me about the object I’m carrying, and then why someone should need an object that tells them where they were born. I tell him I have made it in order that I might find out.

Later he does show me some of the things he’s found that day: after rummaging in the breast pocket of his blue boiler suit he pulls out three small objects. One is a crumpled bit of lead about the size of a walnut; another is smaller, but I can’t remember what he said it was; and the third is a tiny, unassuming button. He told me the reason that you always find a lot of buttons is because they used to plough their clothes into the fields. Being made from wool this would help the soil retain moisture.



*Figure 11. The 'flags' that first piqued my curiosity and made me stop and talk to the metal detectorist: a different way of traversing a landscape by adhering to a line.*



I don't know who 'they' are, and I've not been able to find another source for this claim but I repeat it here not as fact, but as an evocation of a trilateral connection between person, place and object. That crusty, corroded disc was an effective—and affective—vector connecting me to a (temporally) distant stranger.<sup>6</sup>

The pods and the contexts within which they are to be used were designed with the intention that the paper shells could act as vessels for the traces of lived lives, as connections between individuals and as foci for reflection.

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6 If you thought buttons were powerful, you should try the feeling that comes with holding a newly unearthed Bronze Age axe in your hand. I'm told it's quite intense!

## Chapter 5: The ‘Work’ of Art: Prototypes and Tools

Rather than wanting the pods to be rarefied objects preserved behind the glass of a vitrine, I regard them as being functional tools.

Fundamentally, they are a vehicle through which to facilitate the sharing of stories. Not as provocative in the same way as, for example, Galloway’s (2014a) design fiction scenarios of *in vitro* grown lamb or transgenic pets, but with a similar intent to provide a framework around which people can come together and share a conversation (2014b).

Had I been producing the pods with an intention to present them as static, sculptural objects or as a refined design product, then I would have made very different decisions about materials and form. However, what I wanted in this instance was a prototype with low to medium visual/tactile fidelity and a medium functional fidelity. This was in order to leave enough of a blank canvas for participants to feel that they could customise the shell of the pod and also suggest different ways in which the pods could work.

“I’ve spent some time trying to decide on how (or even whether) to decorate my pod. My first thought was felting since I’ve been experimenting with textiles lately, but somehow I thing [sic] I prefer it bare and smooth. I’m toying with a wax or pva wash/varnish. ”

(Participant 2, 2015)

“I’m wondering what people would program if they could have two places. Or, if you had two locations that were essentially in the same direction. Which one would you be reminded of first? Or would both memories emerge at the same time?”

(Participant 9, 2015)

In their ethnographic study of a high-tech firm and investigation of the psychological experience of engaging in the practice of low-fidelity prototyping, Gerber and Carroll (2011) state:

“Low-fidelity prototyping, or the making of physical or virtual representations of ideas, is a critical practice for design practitioners used to construct knowledge about a design, communicate ideas and make decisions [..].”

Rather than to gain knowledge that can be re-applied to the design, I am more interested in using prototypes as tools to understand more—or understand *different*—about my surroundings and my place within them. The knowledge production I seek in this project is not insight to be fed back into successive iterations of the pods, moving them closer towards high fidelity designs, but rather new perceptions about how they can be used and the consequences of these for relationships and interactions with our surroundings. An echo of Meskimmon’s (2003) call for a “shift from object to process, asking not what a work of art is, but what it does – how art *works*.”

O’Conner (2007) gives a detailed account of her progression as a novice glassblower and the transitions in her relationships with the tools she uses. She describes gathering molten glass onto the blowpipe and withdrawing it from the furnace:

“The objects of our subsidiary awareness ‘are not watched in themselves; we watch something else while keeping intensely aware of them’ (Polanyi, 1962: 55). Though my technical capability enabled my gather, I did not pay heed to each step, the distinctness of which had been insisted





Figure 12. The ‘pocket version’ of the pod. It has the same functionality as the paper versions, but is built into a small wooden box that can safely be carried in a back pocket or the bottom of a rucksack.

upon in my early days of glass-blowing, but rather attended the gather itself, the correctness of which informed, if necessary, immediate adjustments to my techniques. I knew my gathering had been apt by virtue of the gather. The objects of subsidiary awareness were not objects of attention, but rather instruments of attention.”

The transition of O’Conner’s awareness from what she was meant to be *doing* with the blowpipe to what she could sense of the *effect she was having through* it on the molten glass took place over many hours of instruction and practice.

I would dearly have liked to have been able to send each of my workshop participants home with a fully working pod (rather than just the outer paper shell) in order to explore how relationships would develop over an extended amount of time<sup>7</sup>. Would they gradually become assimilated into daily routines or be kept separate from the everyday, employed only in occasional rituals? Would there ever come a point where the pod became an extension of the self, subsidiary to an awareness of the place to which it responded?

I’m not sure how likely this would be for the pods in their current form. My experience with one over four days in the Shropshire hills highlighted the paper’s fragility and the awkwardness of the size for carrying it for any length of time. Anticipating this I had made a smaller ‘pocket’ version, housed in a wooden domino box that could be put in a pocket or bag in order to leave my hands free (figure 12).

I used it once and then never again.

The convenience came at the cost of all emotional connection. I just didn’t care about it. Total ambivalence. The wrong tool for this job.

Artist Linda Brothwell talks of how “tools speak of the action that is afforded to them through material choice, ergonomics and scale; layers of readable triggers that can be carefully unpicked to discover the function.” (Brothwell, 2013). Often she crafts her own tools for the specific task at hand; hammers with precisely angled faces for

7 See Dunne and Raby’s (2001) *Placebo* project for a methodology in which volunteers were interviewed after spending an allotted amount of time with one of the designs.



*Figure 13. Forging hammers made by Linda Brothwell for the Sheffield Edition of Acts of Care. (Image: with permission from the artist.)*

hitting specific metals resting on a specific stiddy<sup>8</sup> of a specific height whilst sat on a specific stool. Each suite of tools is intrinsically linked to a single project—part of a system, a unique record of the making of the work—and each item within it bears an insignia that identifies it as such (Brothwell, 2015) (figure 13).

Although my workshop participants didn't have the opportunity to take working pods—functional tools—away with them, they did put a lot of themselves into the making process, with significant results as to how they related to the pods once complete.

“The complexity and at times, frustration of actually building the pod made me feel ownership in a way that being presented with a finished product would not have. The organic movement and responsiveness of the pod, combined with my investment in it made me feel strangely attached to it - protective even”

(Participant 2, 2015)

But the personal connections to the place were definitely drawn out, and I think importantly too through the making of the pod. I hadn't anticipated that this would be such a significant part of the workshop - not necessarily in terms of time spent, but the emotions the making drew out.

(Participant 8, 2015)

From this (and other observations and feedback) I conclude that the time, emotion and skills development invested in the crafting of the pods was successful in making a conceptual space in which participants could reflect on emotional themes and then project the results into the pod in a profound and meaningful way (figure 14).

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8 “A working area with an anvil, often dropped into a tree stump for support” (Brothwell, 2013)



One participant who tweeted that half way through the build “at this point in pod construction I was ready to either set fire to it or just cry a bit” (Gale, 2015a) would later use a vocabulary of having ‘given birth’ to the completed pod and adopt a parental persona when discussing what he would do with the pod after taking it home (Gale, 2015b).

Across all three workshops there was only one participant who reported disappointment in the final result: “this really just felt like a large vibrating compass” (Participant 7, 2015). This is a reasonably accurate description of what the pods are and, I suspect, a response I would have heard much more often if I had either pre-made the pods to bring to the workshop or had written software so that the same functionality could have been achieved with the closed black box of a smartphone.



*Figure 14. a) A workshop participant embraces her pod at the moment it first ‘comes to life’ and b) another gets very excited at the prospect of taking her pod outside for a walk.*



## Chapter 6: Academia, Methods and Mess

I first became aware of the concept of methodologies and methods during placements on the Practice in a Professional Context module. Instinctively drawn to these debates in the social sciences, part of my task for this module was to better understand what they mean for me in terms of my practice. This in turn is part of my wider mission to understand how my practice might constitute research and how that relates to academia.

For many years now I have used phrases like “enquiry-led” and “asking ‘what if’ and then doing experiments to find out” to describe my practice, and yet seeing the potential for my work to be research has only been a relatively recent realisation. Why is my work not already research? I think it’s a) because I don’t do enough to claim the results of the experiments once I have done them and b) a question of how I position my work.

Again in the spirit of embodied learning and accruing practical knowledge, I have been experimenting with changing both of these.

I gave a presentation at the *Networked Urban Mobilities* conference in Copenhagen; the 10th Anniversary Conference of the Cosmobilities Network<sup>9</sup>. Although I had previously run a workshop at a similar conference, this was my first experience of talking about my work in this sort of context. I received positive feedback at the time, and have since been asked to contribute a chapter to a book arising from the conference. (This is terrifying, but I can feel my practice growing in response.)

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9 More information and the presentation I gave can be seen at [http://npugh.co.uk/blog/developing\\_colony\\_presentation\\_at\\_networked\\_urban\\_mobilities/](http://npugh.co.uk/blog/developing_colony_presentation_at_networked_urban_mobilities/)

I also submitted an article for consideration for publication in a cartographies-themed special edition of the journal *Liminalities*. Although the article wasn't accepted for publication, one of the guest editors has requested that I rework it and submit it to a different journal, of which she is permanent editor.

Following the workshop I ran at Goldsmiths my liaison there was keen to have me contribute to a workshop she was running to explore quick-response material thinking as a method of investigating publics and the problematisation of social issues<sup>10</sup>.

The experiences described above have been significant factors contributing to my sense that the work I do (and the way I do it) is of value to parts of academia.

I have to confess that the distinctions between messy methods (Cook, 1998; Law, 2003, 2004; Mellor, 1998, 2012, 2010), inventive methods (Lury and Wakeford, 2012), live methods (Back and Puwar, 2012), mobile methods (Ricketts Hein, Evans and Jones, 2008; Büscher and Urry, 2009) etc. are currently largely lost on me. Mostly, I think, because I take them all for granted as strategies that I can use within my practice whenever I want. I do however appreciate that others don't necessarily have this freedom and I recognise these debates as being about opening up traditionally accepted ways of conducting research and of communicating the results. I come back to this list in the introduction to *Inventive Methods* (Lury and Wakeford, 2012) as a touchstone:

“research methods and dissemination activities that critically engage theory and practice, including participatory and action research methods; performative and non-representational investigations; the acknowledgement of non-human agencies; as well as interdisciplinarity and collaborative and beyond-the-academy working practices.”

Within her sociological practice Jungnickel explores the current difficulties of utilising art-related methods and techniques and the resulting struggle to be accounted for within official university systems of accountability (Jungnickel, 2014; Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014). Both Lury and Wakeford (2012) and Jungnickel and Hjorth (2014) call

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<sup>10</sup> A summary of the workshop is available at <http://www.katjungnickel.com/2015/07/20/dewey-organ-a-junk-hacking-machine-making-workshop/>

for research methods and for transmissions—the communication of the research—to be relevant to the problem: “we do not view methods as separate from transmission; they are entangled in the process of doing the research” (Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014).

This makes sense to me, as it resonates strongly with what I think of as ‘Ryan Gander’s Unofficial Principle of Circles’<sup>11</sup>: of striving to make sure that the artwork is strong from whichever direction you push it; that all decisions relate back to the central brief. From my position safely outside of the world of peer review, ‘publish or perish’ and of Research Excellence Frameworks, why on Earth *wouldn’t* you relate your mode of communication back to what was at the heart of the project?

Nevertheless, despite calls within the social sciences for “fluid and decentered modes for knowing the world allegorically, indirectly, perhaps pictorially, sensuously, poetically” (Law and Urry, 2004, cited by Southern, 2014) it is not yet a *fait accompli*. This is part of why I’m attracted to the growing discipline of Mobilities Studies: as a comparatively young area of study it feels like the edges are not yet ossified and there is a receptiveness to exploring how things might be done; a willingness to try things out.

I have certain freedoms as a result of not being ensconced within the academy and only further experimentation will tell me how many of these I am willing to trade in order to align myself with academia. Do I retain my identity as freelance artist, but work alongside academics and academic systems as a para-academic (Wardrop and Withers, 2014)? Or dive in, maintaining an agenda of being both in and between things (Southern, 2014a)?

For now though, I am firmly within academic systems as an MA student, writing an evaluative document and having spent a significant amount of the last year reading about mess—“the 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

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11 Artist Ryan Gander led a group tutorial I was part of towards the end of my BA. In it he challenged another student as to why he was exhibiting a constellation-related sculpture in a courtyard in Birmingham and not on the Greenwich Meridian in London. He went on to talk about circles and being rigorous in your artistic decision-making. ‘Ryan Gander’s Unofficial Principle of Circles’ is my part-remembered and slightly embellished version of that kick up the pants.



knowledge” (Law quoted in Jungnickel and Hjorth, 2014). I can’t not acknowledge the effects various difficult-to-deal-with things have had on the experience and outcomes of this research project.

After two months repeatedly trying and failing to get access to the skills and resources required, I had to abandon my initial plans for wax pods built upon a clamshell armature. Had I been able to make these, the emphasis of the workshops would have been on participants customising the shell so as to represent the places and stories the pods would then be connected to.

I would normally regard the changing of plans to be a healthy sign of interrogation of a project and an evolution of understanding, however this was caused by external factors rather than an internal progression and, as a result, was experienced as a massive disjoint. Plan B had to be realised under a much reduced timescale and, although to a large extent it held its own as a project, there were several times where, under questioning from workshop participants, it became evident that my thinking was still partially stuck with my original intentions. My Unofficial Ryan Gander Circle was simultaneously trying to be based around two different centres, resulting in incongruence and something of a conceptual hole that I fell down a few times.

Shortly before Christmas I chanced upon the discovery of the university’s research ethics policy. Upon investigation I learned that the nature of the workshops I was planning would require me to submit paperwork for full review; by the time my proposal had been prepared, submitted and approved I had lost a significant amount of time during which I had planned to have already organised and run the workshops.

Instead of the five workshops I had planned to run, I could only arrange for three. The workshops I couldn’t make happen being the ones that would have really tested my practice in new contexts. Here I had to partially let go of the original premise for the whole research project.

Now running significantly behind on an already tight schedule, instead of collecting my data early in the Spring term, I had to run workshops in late March and April. This brought me into conflict with Easter vacations and assessment periods for the two university-based workshops and left me minimal time to process the results. With only one workshop completed before Easter, I had alarmingly little raw material

*Figure 15 (overleaf). I make an effort to share activity-involving-making on Twitter as a way of combatting perceptions of me as a ‘digital’ artist. On this occasion it also provided a time-stamped record of ...well, of things going remarkably smoothly, considering. The full timeline through until the Thursday can be viewed at <https://storify.com/nikkipugh/ma-final-push>*

- a) Collecting cardboard tubes at Severn View Services after they'd been relayed across from London*
- b) Gauging proportions for the plinths*
- c) Template making*
- d) Sourcing and cutting of plywood at a sawmill*
- e) and f) Test cushion design (needed to stop the bottoms of the pods from collapsing)*
- g) Window-based jig in my lounge to cut the tubes at right angles*
- h) Tubes cut down to the correct length*

to respond to either in this essay or in terms of practical work for exhibition. That's largely what prompted the trip to Shropshire: for some time it looked like a tent would have to form the basis of any exhibited artwork.

The official complaint triggered by the omission of me being informed about ethics review and the subsequent handling has caused me a lot of stress and resulting consequences for my health. Not an ideal sort of embodied learning experience, but providing a different angle from which to consider the extent to which I wish to work within universities and the environments they can harbour.

With those 11 years' experience of being self-employed, working in schools, on festival commissions and as lead artist and project manager, I am used to coping with tight deadlines and last-minute changes in circumstances. These skills were tested extensively when clarification of the options I had been offered as part of an extension was received only six days before the original assessment date. Figure 15 outlines how I was able to harness networks, a knowledge of suppliers, fabrication skills and time management over the bank holiday weekend in order to pull together the foundation of an exhibition.

This timing had a massive impact on the work I presented for assessment in May: decisions were based on availability of materials; display strategies that I could be reasonably confident I could make work at the first attempt; and simply what it was logistically possible to make happen in such a short time. Under different circumstances I would—among other things—have corrected the colour balance of the photos on the wall and sought a less plinth-like way of displaying the pods.

These were concessions I was prepared to make for the assessment option that would accommodate live demonstrations of the pods: something I felt was of great importance for a piece of work manifesting in 3D interactive objects that were designed to be experienced primarily through the sense of touch<sup>12</sup>.

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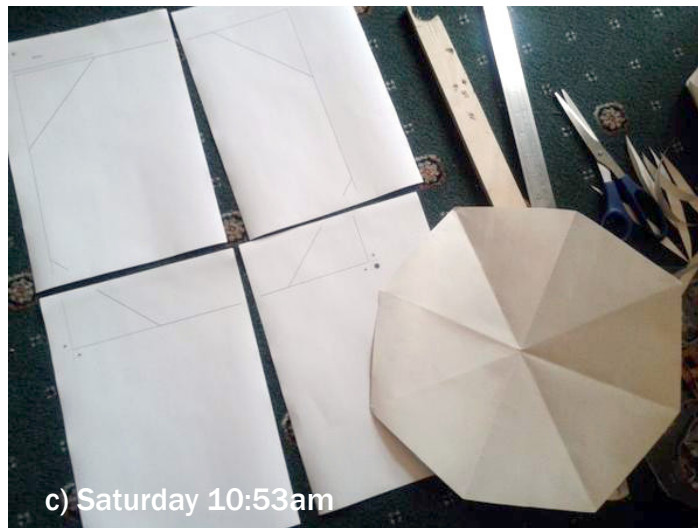
<sup>12</sup> This assessment was cancelled 2 hours before the agreed slot, however many, many thanks to Lisa, Jurek, Dave and Adam, without whose help and generosity it wouldn't have been possible to meet that deadline.



a) Friday 10:14pm



b) Saturday 9:50am



c) Saturday 10:53am



d) Saturday 1:53pm





e) Saturday 7:06pm



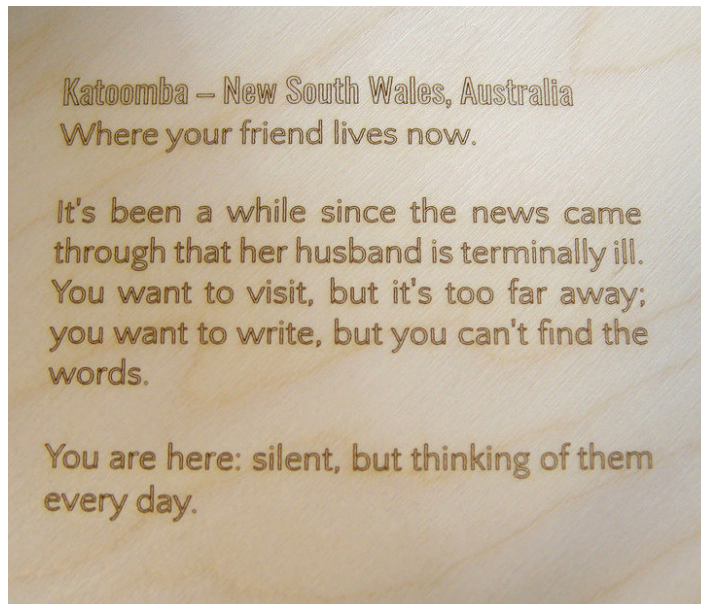
f) Saturday 10:01pm



g) Sunday 8:28pm



h) Monday 12:16pm



*Figure 16. One of the five selected stories, laser-cut into plywood for display next to the accompanying plinth.*

## Chapter 7: Dissemination and Audiences

I know from the feedback I received from participants during and after the workshops that they were successful in terms of an event experienced by an audience. Most of the people at the first workshop cited positive experiences with previous workshops and events of mine as the reason for being there that day: an indication that this is the sort of thing I already do well. It would have been interesting to see if this would have carried through to the planned workshop with immigrant and refugee craftswomen when I would have been in much less familiar territory in terms of participant demographic.

Because the workshops happened so late in the year, there wasn't a lot of opportunity to distil outcomes or explore different options for presenting the project to other audiences. Despite the mess outlined above, it was important to me that the project should have a public event by way of sharing and celebrating the contribution of the participants. To have just skulked off without offering anything back would have felt rude and, I think, also have left the project incomplete.

I was a bit apprehensive about how the experience of the project might translate from being people walking with pods they'd made that were linked to places of significance to them, to people walking with neither pods nor stories that they had prior connection with.

I chose five stories/places that represented a range of types of connections that had come out of the workshops: aspiration, nostalgia, humour, rootedness and presence-by-proxy. I then distilled them down to a few sentences written in the second person to accompany a pod that would respond to the same place (figure 16). I hoped this would encourage people to imagine themselves either in that scenario or in similar situations they may have experienced themselves. I then spent the first three days of the exhibition telling people "do touch".





*Figure 17. General installation view and details of photo series 'hands' and 'holds'.*





I knew I would have to do a certain amount of activation in order to get people picking up and walking with the pods. This was fine by me as it was another way of fostering dialogue and gaining further insight into the project. I also knew I wouldn't be able to take more time away from other projects I was being paid to work on (the exhibition ran for a week), so the accompanying text on the wall was phrased for when I would be elsewhere and the pods wouldn't be in interactive mode. A beneficial side effect of this was that I soon had my patter worked out for succinctly explaining the key points of the project.

I also exhibited tightly-cropped images of workshop participants' hands. One series showing the tensions and pauses as people waited for glue to dry, the other showing the ways the pods were gently held once they were complete and assembled (see figure 17 for installation views). These gave me a way in to conversations about two important elements of the workshop: affordances of the slow crafting process and our emotional connections to the digital technologies in our lives.

I knew I had done a decent job with this project, but I was blown away by the responses of people at the exhibition. Many first reacted with disbelief and suspicion as I explained "each pod is connected to the place in its story; walk with the pod and when you are facing in the direction of that place it will respond and let you know". Some later explained that this was because it was just made from paper and they didn't think it would really do anything; that they thought I was lying to them. Throughout the three days I repeatedly watched people stop dead in their tracks and facial expressions change to astonishment and delight.

Some people chose to walk with a single pod around the whole room, others spent twenty minutes or so spending time with all of the stories. Young, old, darting about, in wheelchairs and everything in between.

Many times I saw people call over family members to share the experience.  
Many times I heard conversations starting "That was really interesting!" as groups left the room.  
Many times I was told that this stood out for being the only interactive thing people had encountered throughout the whole degree show.  
Many times I chatted to people about the project and the overlaps with their stories.

*Figure 18 (overleaf). Visitors to the exhibition walk with the pods and the stories.*

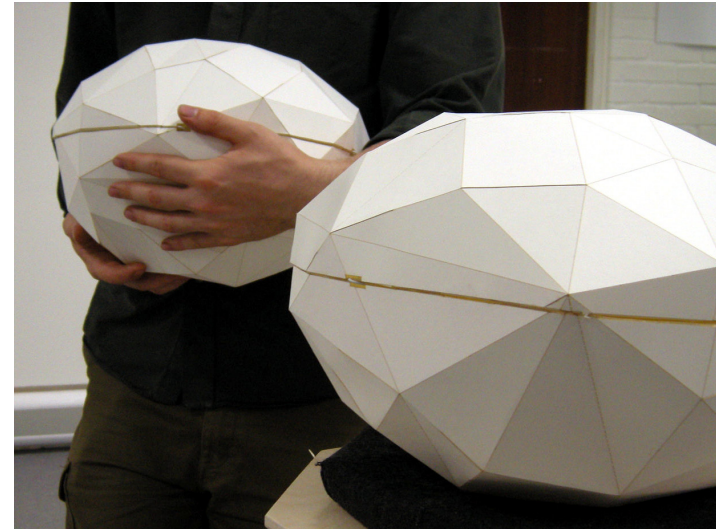


Figure 18 shows photos of people interacting with the pods and each other.

I recognised a few people making return visits over the three days I was there. The most striking for me was the student who discovered the pods on the Friday evening, then on the Saturday made sure he brought all the groups he was leading for the Open Day guided tours in to have a go. On Sunday he came back with his father.

I'd originally planned for scheduled group walks outside with the pods, but it became apparent that this wasn't going to work with the Open Day and the way the flows of visitors were working, so I dropped that in favour of making quality connections with people when they did come. It was great to be able to spend half an hour talking to one person, but there was also something thrilling about the times when lots of people arrived at once and you'd look up and not one of the pods was still on its plinth.<sup>13</sup>

*How to Play Knowledge* was a conference on the theme of how to communicate research run for Art, Design and Media Ph.D. candidates at Birmingham City University. I was asked to be a presenter and I used the opportunity as an occasion to articulate some of my thoughts coming out of this course. As well as being a chance to claim my practice as research, I took some pods with me and, with embodied ways of communicating research in mind, experimented with ways of bringing elements of the exhibition into a lecture theatre conference environment.<sup>14</sup>

When it came to the point where I wanted to demonstrate the pods, I requested three volunteers. One after another I turned my back on the audience and spoke directly to them and them only as I placed a pod in their hands and told them about the person they would be walking with through it. As I did this I showed a slide of the relevant text so that the remaining audience could find a way into what was happening. I then gave the volunteers a few minutes to walk around with the pods and the audience a chance to ask them questions and make requests.

This seemed to work well as a negotiation between the intimacy I feel the stories deserve and the practicalities of a room full of people.

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13 Videos of some of these moments can be seen at [http://npugh.co.uk/blog/photos\\_and\\_video\\_from\\_where\\_the\\_sky\\_widens\\_degree\\_show/](http://npugh.co.uk/blog/photos_and_video_from_where_the_sky_widens_degree_show/)

14 See [http://npugh.co.uk/blog/reflections\\_on\\_communicating\\_research/](http://npugh.co.uk/blog/reflections_on_communicating_research/) for my slides and a few responses from the audience.



A few people got in touch with me after the conference wanting to have chats; something that I usually interpret as a positive sign.

As a whole, *Where the Sky Widens* seems to have a place amongst discussion and practice relating to embodied methods and thinking through materials. This won't be the last time I present it to a research-orientated audience.

## Chapter 8: Updating the Map

So, after a year with such highs and lows, where do I find myself now and where would I like to go next?

I wasn't able to try on new hats for my practice in quite the way that I had hoped, but I did get some way towards addressing the bullet points at the opening of the second chapter.

The reading I have done alongside the practical component of this research project has introduced me to areas of practice and debate where I see my work has a resonance. I now have new vocabulary to help articulate this and have already been making shifts in my practice outside of the MA course that align it more closely with a research agenda. I still feel a strong affinity with Mobilities Studies, but with a new awareness of non-representational theory and other debates around methodologies of conducting and transmitting research I am homing in on more specific ways in which my practice feeds back into that academic context.

As evidenced in this discussion and the bibliography, I have found Sociology to be a rich source of inspiration and relevant texts. Although not discussed here, this also includes writing on sensing landscapes, dwelling in places and—although I am still trying to find my way with this one—human-technology assemblages.

Having Ethnography described to me as being a 'toolkit of techniques' (Jungnickel, 2014) was a revelation, and I have been using this module to evaluate assimilating some of those tools into my practice. This was my way in for thinking about research ethics (particularly in contrast to how I had encountered things like informed consent in previous work) and in particular I anticipate using coding of qualitative data and use of field notes more in upcoming projects.

Importantly, for all this talk of Sociology, Ethnography and Mobilities Studies, I maintain my identity as an artist. I do not wish to become a sociologist or an ethnographer, but I am interested in the blurry edges between these disciplines and my practice. Where do they overlap and where are they usefully different? Where are the margins across which dynamic exchanges can happen and where are the spaces where transformation can happen?

Onwards to fruitful entanglements and complex heterogeneous networks.



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