

## An Artist's Ignorant Turn

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### Introduction

Throughout 2013 and 2014 monthly meetings of my project *Ignoramus Anonymous* were held at libraries throughout Sydney, as well as in gallery and festival contexts across Australia. *Ignoramus Anonymous* is a support group for ignorance and participatory performance work that involves coming together with strangers to share and revel in what you do not know, and what you do not know that you do not know. In so doing, each meeting provides collective support for the ignorance that is latent in every individual, from the everyday to the increasingly complex. Nothing new is necessarily learnt at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, but the support offered is a form of pedagogy in itself.

That *Ignoramus Anonymous* is simultaneously a support group for ignorance *and* a participatory performance work is integral to the project. I will assert, after French philosopher Jacques Rancière, that the self-containment of the support group employs a “self-sufficiency” that does not rend art and life into separate spheres. It is the appearance of a form of life in which art is not art (Rancière 2002, 136). I will argue that the support group form that I employ brings a temporary micro-community together in which intellectual emancipation is theoretically possible because it involves turning away from explication by another and turning toward self-analysis, ignorance, and the unknown. To make this argument I will begin with an outline of the project, chronicling its development in relation to Rancière, and how the event is framed and orchestrated through “dialogical aesthetics” (Kester 2004). Then I will position the project in relation to the “educational turn” in contemporary art observed by curator and critical theorist Irit Rogoff and focus on what possibilities reside in the turning toward ignorance and what *Ignoramus Anonymous* might achieve in doing this. Finally, I will draw on the voices of participants of the support group as “productive irritants” (Schneider and Wright 2006) to clarify my argument and provide the necessary objectivity to provoke an active ongoing debate.<sup>1</sup>

I offer this analysis as practice-based research, from my perspective as the artist behind the work, where I am what critical Grant Kester refers to as a “context provider” rather than a “content provider” (Kester 2004, 1). In *Ignoramus Anonymous*, the context I provide is a space to converse and reflect on ignorance, and I do so through adopting the social form of the support group.

### My Adventure Toward Ignorance Begins

In 2012, I was Artist-in-Residence at Waverley Council in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. This meant that I was provided a free artist studio space to use as I wished for six months, and in exchange for this I had to provide a “community benefit project” that stemmed from my art practice. At the time, I was reading Rancière’s *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* (1991), which chronicles French schoolteacher Joseph Jacotot’s “intellectual adventure” in 1818 whereby he discovered that he was able to teach what he himself did not know: the Flemish language. He concluded that not only was knowledge not necessary to teach, but explication was also not necessary to the act of learning. The results of his radical examination of pedagogy led him to announce that all

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people were equally intelligent, including himself and his students, and that it was only in the will to use intelligence that people differ.<sup>2</sup> Jacotot referred to his philosophical methodology as “intellectual emancipation.” Rancière uses the case of the Jacotot methodology to elucidate his own position on emancipation in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*, and he further extends his position in *The Emancipated Spectator*,<sup>3</sup> in which he applies these ideas to artistic practice. Rancière reconciles the learning student with the art viewer, musing that in both cases there is a stultifying logic of straight uniform transmission. “There is a something on one side—a form of knowledge, a capacity, an energy in a body or a mind—and it must pass to the other side” (Rancière 2009, 14). What you must see, feel, and think, as both student and spectator, is what is communicated to you. Rancière calls for such stultification to be overthrown, and to establish an emancipation from this problem of one-way uniform transmission of content.

The Jacotot story inspired me to undertake an adventure of my own. I began to consider orchestrating a school of ignorance as my community benefit project for the Waverley Council residency, similar to the “universal teaching” method developed by Jacotot. In the project, a range of local people would teach a range of subjects that they did not know. My rationale was that this could be a method for discovery, because both those teaching and those learning would be unburdened by the known and prescribed, and so the results would be in flux with unknown possibilities. As a nascent idea, it was an ironic subversion of what constituted a “benefit” for the community in the first place, particularly in the wake of the fraught ethics regarding “benefits for the community” observed by critics like Claire Bishop. Bishop articulates these ethics most comprehensively in her book *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, in which she seeks a more nuanced language to address the artistic status of such work, rather than discussing these practices solely in positivist terms and focusing on demonstrable “impact” (Bishop 2012, 18). Rancière’s point in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* is not to prove “that all intelligence is equal. It’s seeing what can be achieved under that supposition” (Rancière 1991, 46). For Bishop, this means that equality is a method or working principle rather than a goal. Equality is continually verified by being put into practice (Bishop 2012, 266). Exploring such a supposition and its verification through practice was to become the centre of my burgeoning project.

What subjects would actually be delved into and “taught” at this school of ignorance, I wondered. There was so much that I was personally ignorant about that I was not sure where to begin. In a brief survey of locals I met with on the idea, there seemed to be a degree of difficulty for everyone in discussing what they did not know, and how their particular ignorance might be harnessed. Maybe a school of ignorance is not what was needed at all, I thought. Maybe I had exposed what was a genuine need for the community. That need was a space to discuss all this ignorance, the sheer extent of which was halting progress on realizing this initial idea of orchestrating a school of ignorance.

The focus of the community benefit project shifted from subverting a transaction of knowledge to being a support group for the overwhelming lack of knowledge that I believed everyone grappled with (or hid from) on a daily basis. My provocation was that when something is encountered in life that is not understood, then it should be questioned. If it is not questioned, then ignorance is being hidden from, even with gracious acceptance. The support group was to be a space to admit our ignorance by tapping into child-like questioning, a performance that encouraged a transformative turn toward the unknown. This shift that the work took was the first emancipatory turn of the project, because it meant that the work was now a conversation between equals rather than involving the power structure of a presiding “school teacher” figure. This is what emancipation means for Rancière: “the blurring of the boundary between those who act and those who look; between individuals and members of a collective body” (Rancière 2009, 19). Because a support group space lacked the power structure of such a boundary, I had

the hunch that it was charged with alternative possibilities to those of a conventional educational space. As the work manifested, I continued to examine how this might or might not be the case. I noticed, for example, that a support group for ignorance might embody such an idea of emancipation because the unanswerable questions raised through the meeting devolved pre-existing intellectual authorities and assumed logics and that the collective body of a micro-community could form in their place. In these temporary micro-communities, an equality could be observed in our ignorance. This is not to say that I was developing a utopic state with an assessable efficacy. Rather that, through Rancière's thinking on education and emancipation, *Ignoramus Anonymous* was exploring what can be achieved under the supposition that collectively turning toward what we don't know and understand can create equality. For Rancière, "equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is verified" (Rancière 1991, 137) and through providing the context of a support group for ignorance I was researching how it might be practised or verified.<sup>4</sup>

When it came time to deliver my community benefit project, I held a support group for ignorance in a side room of the Waverley Council Library. I titled the project *Ignoramus Anonymous*, after Alcoholics Anonymous, and billed it as "a support group for the ignorant, i.e. for anyone and everyone." In attendance were a handful of community members, council staff, and colleagues of mine. On arrival, I welcomed each individual and offered them wine and hors d'oeuvres and encouraged them to take a seat in a circle of chairs I had arranged in advance. When it was time to begin I re-introduced the event and what it was all about and asked the group to share confessions of their ignorance.

The result was rather forced, and no one really wanted to join in. It did not help that there was a "know-it-all" in the group who put people off by lecturing those that did put forward their ignorance. In the words of another participant he became a "bad character" and upon reflection I should have gently reeled him in to explain that this was not a space for teaching but a place for support, and his condescension was entirely unsupportive. I did continue to encourage him to share his own ignorance throughout the event, but he was not interested or willing to do so, and such a position became common in a number of future meetings of the project. What makes the actions of such individuals into "bad characters" in the group is that they assert themselves into a role of master-explicator, which as Rancière says "stultifies by telling [others] that they can't learn without him" (Rancière 1991, 28). Explication is not called for or wanted at *Ignoramus Anonymous*, and when it happens the hierarchy we are turning away from becomes palpable and the community fractured.

The feedback from this community benefit project presentation, which was essentially a trial of the work, was that I had tried a little too hard to get people to dive right in and talk about their ignorance. It was felt that the unease from this beginning stayed throughout the meeting. Apart from this criticism, feedback was promising, and there was a consensus that genuine benefits could be envisioned from such an event in the future. Benefits speculated on included the creative and critical faculties that the "think-space" inspired, talking through alternate perspectives on life, hubristic flaws as entertainment to learn from, and even free therapy. In debriefing, I recognized the "art of conversation" necessary in the craft of the performance of my role, that role being to facilitate invisibly in a more subtle hands-off fashion. The "art must tear itself away from the territory of aestheticized life," as Rancière wrote (Rancière 2002, 147), and I must "disappear" as the artist and become one with/of the support group.

## An Adventure in Context Over Content

Some months passed and then the Australia Council for the Arts launched a new grant to fund artist residencies at organizations where artist residency programs were not yet in place. The short-lived program sounded similar to a government-funded version of the British initiative led by artist couple Barbara Steveni and John Latham in the 1960s, the Artist Placement Group (APG):

The [APG] was premised on the idea that art has a useful contribution to make to the world, and that artists can serve society—not by making works of art, but through their verbal interactions in the context of institutions and organisations. To this end [APG] organized placements or residencies for British artists in a range of private corporations and public bodies. (Bishop 2012, 164)

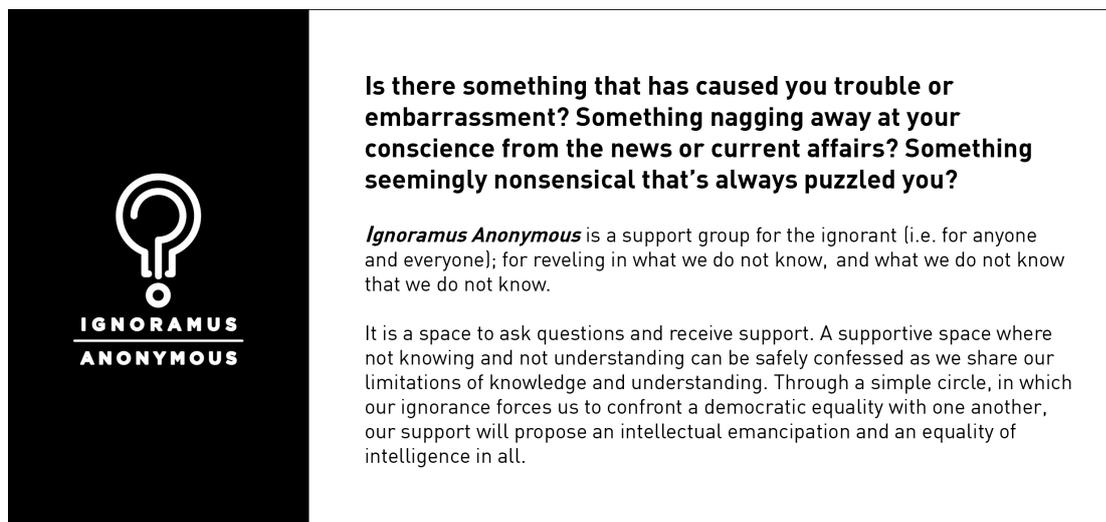
The APG's slogan was “the context is half the work,” and it operated on the principle of pushing the artist out into society (Bishop 2012, 166). Like the Australia Council initiative, the APG was not only interested in the production of artwork as an outcome but also in reciprocal exchange, and learning and development from both parties. I managed to acquire myself one of these grants, making me artist in residence of the State Library of New South Wales. I was an “incidental person” (Bishop 2012, 164) at the organization, which was how the APG referred with much tactical humility to the artists that they organized residencies for, and I would use the residency to focus on *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

Context was half the work for me as well. Or even more than half the work. Context is what I am providing as an artist with *Ignoramus Anonymous*. This is how Grant Kester describes artists using a performative process-based approach, using the words of British artist Peter Dunn to articulate such artists as being “context providers” rather than “content providers” (Kester 2004, 1). Like Dunn's work, my practice also involves the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations, beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum (Kester 2004, 1). The context of *Ignoramus Anonymous* facilitated the manifestation of unknown content as a by-product of participating in self-analysis and verification, much like the context of Jacotot's pedagogical method, in which no pre-determined content is transferred either.

The first context for *Ignoramus Anonymous* was in situating itself in a similar space beyond the confines of an art institution, somewhere where the work would have a greater resonance and be more appropriate. I thought of the library as a perfect location for the work, where it would importantly also not be seen as “art” but more as an everyday “event” in a public program.<sup>5</sup> The second context for *Ignoramus Anonymous* was in the orchestration of the meeting itself. For this context of dialogical aesthetics, Kester suggests an image of the artist “defined in terms of openness, of listening . . . and of a willingness to accept a position of dependence and intersubjective vulnerability relative to the viewer or collaborator” (Kester 2004, 110). This is what I looked at harnessing in my second context, creating within the meeting a space of generosity from the commencement of the event.

I came to the idea of beginning the meeting with some guided meditation. I wrote a meditation text that focused on encouraging growing reflection on how little it was possible to know in life. I inserted honest examples of my own ignorance, and the text became demonstrative of how the project functioned. Through the meditation text, I was able to *establish the performance from within the performance*, without the terse outlining of rules or the need to encourage that I had commenced with in the earlier iteration of the project, or indeed without any frame of the performance as “art” at all. It was a Rancièrian refuting of “the hierarchical divisions of the

perceptible” and the “framing [of] a common sensorium (Rancière 2002, 150–51). For art historian Sophie Berrebi, Rancière’s framing of a sensorium is the framing of “a way of being” but “in a context in which art has not been attributed a specific place” (Berrebi 2008, 2).<sup>6</sup> It is the framing of a consensual community “in which the spiritual sense of being-in-common is embedded” (Rancière 2010, 81). Now the sensorium of *Ignoramus Anonymous* began with my welcoming of individuals as they trickled in at the advised start time, based on advertisements for “Ignoramus Anonymous, a support group for ignorance,” and I would memorize each person’s name as I met them on arrival. I would offer them some hospitality and encourage them to take a seat in a circle of chairs. I would bring the meeting to a start by saying how good it was to see everyone there. I would go around the circle saying the name of everyone present. I would then explain that the event begins with some guided meditation to establish the meeting. I would suggest that it is best done with eyes closed, if agreeable, and then I would proceed with the meditation text.



*Ignoramus Anonymous* invitation example, which advertised the project at the libraries. Logo: Marissa Gillies, 2013.

At the conclusion of the meditation, there was often a pause as those present would open their eyes and look around the circle, waiting for someone else to speak and raise their own ignorance first. I would wait too, only intervening if someone looked like they had something they wanted to say but needed a little encouragement. Someone always had something to share and would do so after this initial moment passed, and then a question would be proposed.

From this point on the meeting would unfold, over the course of an hour, as what media critic Gail Priest referred to as an “analogue Google machine” (Priest 2014). As an analogy, it positions the support group circle as a DIY search engine that resituates the knowledge/ignorance and understandings/misunderstandings of those present as the content of the work.<sup>7</sup> The meeting exposes that knowledge and understanding are more lacking than first thought (particularly when cut off from the Internet). At *Ignoramus Anonymous*, we self-produce knowledge and understanding by reconfiguring our typical relationship with it, which is frequently a relationship of passive consumption to a superior master source. As Rancière points out, “the student is emancipated if he is obliged to use his own intelligence” (Rancière 1991, 15), and at *Ignoramus Anonymous* attendees have this obligation.

The mere consumption of knowledge is described in a foundational text of critical pedagogy, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) by Brazilian philosopher and educator Paulo Freire, as a “banking” model of education, in which a teacher deposits knowledge to the student. For Freire, this

reinforces similar subjugation and oppression in the learning individual, rather than inspiring awareness of their position as a historical subject capable of producing change. Bishop points out that Rancière omits from *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* the emergence of the critical pedagogy of the 1960s by the likes of Freire, despite similarities in championing an empowerment of learning subjects. She notes: “Unlike Rancière, it is significant that Freire maintains that hierarchy can never be entirely erased” (Bishop 2012, 266). For Freire, “dialogue does not exist in a political vacuum. Dialogue takes place inside some programme and content. These conditioning factors create tension in achieving goals that we set for dialogic education” (Freire 1987, 102). What the program of *Ignoramus Anonymous* seeks to do, through playing with the social form of a support group as performance (and with the conditioning factors that permeate intellectual hierarchies), is reconfigure goals of dialogic education: to encourage a turn toward ignorance, not necessarily for the pragmatic acquisition of knowledge, but to critically understand the possibility for equality therein. *Ignoramus Anonymous* proposes, like Rancière, that “we don’t know that men are equal. We are saying that they *might* be . . . and we are trying . . . to verify it. But we know that this *might* is the very thing that makes a society of humans possible” (Rancière 1991, 73). That verification is taking place through the critical occupation of the social form of the support group.

### **An Adventure Through Social Form**

Adopting social forms is part of what I do as an artist. In the 2011 “Creative Time Summit” on the major retrospective of socially engaged art *Living as Form*, artist and academic Ted Purves quoted sociologist Georg Simmel to define social form as “the mode of interaction among individuals through or in a shape [in] which specific content achieves social reality” (Purves 2011). The achievement of social reality through social form, for Simmel, is constituted by “reciprocal influencing” (Simmel 1909, 297) within the given mode of interaction. Purves delineates “social form” from “social content,” with the content being the interest, purpose, or motivation of the interaction, and the interaction being the form. It is a space where reciprocal influencing is at play within the content, and the content achieves reality through the use of the social form.

I use existing social forms as ready-mades for re-framing as spaces in which audiences and collaborators participate in the work as a live performance. For me, the social form acts in place of Rancière’s crucial third term in the process of the emancipation of the spectator: “spectacle” (Rancière 2007, 278). Rancière’s spectacle, which derives from a Debordian situationist critique, mediates between the artist’s idea and the spectator’s feeling and interpretation, and he suggests that the spectacle produced by the artist is the thing to which these two other terms can refer in the process of emancipation. The occupation of the social form is similarly crucial for me in the process of emancipation, but the decisive difference is that the essence of human activity is not distanced or alienated from us in the exteriority of social form in the first place. The social form links people; it does not separate them, as Guy Debord observed the spectacle to do in his 1967 work of philosophy and critical theory *The Society of the Spectacle* (Debord 1994). It is my assertion that the shared space of the social form in *Ignoramus Anonymous* prevents stultification and that within the performance of social form the “aesthetic experience is effective inasmuch as it is the experience of that *and*” (Rancière 2002, 134). Rancière’s italicized *and* is interpreted by Bishop as the necessary tension held between art *and* the social (Bishop 2012, 278). The performance of social form holds that tension, not collapsing the two but oscillating between the art and the social without ever quite being entirely one or the other.

In 1818, Jacotot used the bilingual edition of François Fénelon’s *Télémaque* (1699), from which the students learned Flemish through comparing and contrasting with the French text they

understood. The book, for Rancière, represented the mediation between Jacotot as the pedagogue and his students. For Rancière, this book being foreign to both master and student is integral in his provocation toward intellectual emancipation, as “to prevent stultification there must be something between master and student” (Rancière 2007, 278). It was the “third term” to which the teacher and student could refer in the process of emancipation. In 2012, with *Ignoramus Anonymous*, my exploration of this provocation used the social form of the support group as a participatory performance that placed the mediation not just between an audience and myself, but *around* us in a temporal, self-mediating and democratic circle. A circle fittingly has no beginning/end or front/back, and when sitting in a circle everyone is equally viewable to everyone else. Education researchers Gert Biesta and Charles Bingham interpret such all-inclusivity as at the heart of democracy for Rancière (Biesta and Bingham 2010). It is my assertion that the support group circle is democratic for this reason and that the actions engaged in through the inclusive support group for ignorance are democratizing for this same reason.

The materiality of Jacotot’s copy of *Télémaque* kept two minds at an equal distance, those of Jacotot and his students, whereas explication would have been “the annihilation by of one mind by another” (Rancière 1991, 32). *Ignoramus Anonymous* uses the support group to hold minds at an equal distance by similarly removing the act of explication and encouraging a turn together toward ignorance. For writer and researcher Steve Corcoran, the key principle of Jacotot’s universal teaching method is to “go against yourself” (Corcoran 2016), in so doing understanding how you learn and the identifications you make, and demanding verification of what you say and think. The same can be said of the “turn” in *Ignoramus Anonymous*, in which those present demand a similar verification. It is a turn against ourselves and toward our ignorance. It is an ignorant turn in the wake of the much-discussed educational turn in contemporary art.

### **An Adventure in Turning**

In her analysis of what has become known as the “educational turn” in art, Irit Rogoff reflects that learning itself is a series of “turns.” She suggests that in a turn we are activated, as we shift *away* from something or *toward* or *around* something, and in so doing we learn. For Rogoff, in a turn, it is fittingly *who we are*, rather than *what it is*, that is in movement (Rogoff 2008). It is *we* who do the turning rather than the *subject*. The subject in the case of Rogoff’s argument is education and the act of pedagogy itself. Rogoff calls for artistic practices to capture both the dynamics of a turn and the kind of activation that is released in the process of a turn. Advocacy for this drive that is released in the process of the educational turn in art is advocacy for the very act of shifting toward education in the public reception of artistic projects that deal with pedagogical aesthetics. Rogoff has difficulty reconciling this call, though, noting herself as being guilty at times of a fixation on the initial turn, toward education for the artist and curator, rather than what it releases in the viewers’ experience of the artwork. It should be the viewer turning toward education and the act of learning, but for Rogoff the educational turn in art was a shift in artistic practice that did not necessarily lead to a shift in reception for commensurate “rethinking” by the viewer. The artist was turning but not necessarily the public. The educational turn in art

signaled a shift away from . . . dominant aesthetics towards an insistence on the unchartable, processual nature of any creative enterprise. Yet . . . has led all too easily into the emergence of a mode of “pedagogical aesthetics” in which a table in the middle of the room, a set of empty bookshelves, a growing archive of assembled bits and pieces, a classroom or lecture scenario, or the promise of a conversation have taken away the burden to rethink and dislodge daily those dominant burdens ourselves. (Rogoff 2008)

For Rogoff, *conversation* was the most significant shift in the art world in the decade preceding her

2008 essay. She observes that *talking* has emerged as a practice, echoing Kester's earlier articulation of dialogue itself as an art form. In his book *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004), Kester champions "dialogical aesthetics" in which oral communication is the prominent centre around which the artwork revolves. Kester, like Rogoff, is interested in conversation for the possibility of outcomes outside of art institutions, and not simply for the avenue it provides to subvert dominant artworld paradigms. The artistic practices of verbal communication articulated by Kester can be observed to have many similarities with the pedagogical aesthetics in the educational turn noted by Rogoff. Indeed, the call from both Rogoff and Kester is for the turning of artistic practice to affect further turning in the public experience of the work, as both individuals and a collective, resulting in genuine *transformation*.

Transformation results from the rethinking and dislodging of dominant burdens. Rogoff refers to pedagogy as a dominant burden. The cause of the burden can be interpreted via Rancière's argument that the very act of pedagogy is necessarily subjugating of the individual because it asserts a primary authority from which knowledge is transferred. A dominant daily burden for the individual is more specifically on the other side of the pedagogical process, in what is *unknown* to them but *known* by someone else. This burden is a subjugating one for Rancière because what is unknown to the student is known by a therefore always superior pedagogue.

The artist is also always in a more knowing and superior place than the spectator of their work. Even in fields of naïve art and outsider art, where the artwork is produced by those who are untrained, or children, or have a disability, the artist still holds the superior position in the reception of their work because content is transferring from their side to the side of the viewer, usually in a one-way fashion at their instigation. For artists engaged in pedagogical aesthetics, then, rather than a turn toward education and what is known and transferred by one party or source to the other, what might be provoked by a focus on what is not known and a turn *together* with viewers toward shared collective *ignorance* and the *unknown*?

On a daily basis, each of us turns away from our ignorance. We do this to save face, to avoid embarrassment and conflict (both internal and external), and to retain the sense of identity that we have founded on what we believe we know. Cosmologist Carl Sagan gives an example of this in his introduction to theoretical physicist Stephen Hawking's *A Brief History of Time* (1988), where he notes that it is only children who do not know enough to avoid stopping to ask really clever questions (Hawking 1988, ix). One such question might be: "Why does time move forward and not backward?" Adults on the receiving end of this question are most likely then confronted with their lack of understanding and ability to explain what is a fundamental law that governs life as we know it, particularly without sounding condescending to the child. In this case, the learning process that unfolds will likely trigger further questions in a situation more akin to an active conversation than the stultifying form of a lecture, in which the side of the student is often rendered subordinate.<sup>8</sup>

Imagine the humorous situation where the child continues to ask "Why?" in response to every answer the adult continues to give. The adult is increasingly confronted with his or her own ignorance as what is raised continues to feed back into the conversation in a reciprocal fashion. Every piece of knowledge drawn upon to answer the pesky child will only require more knowledge for clarification and confirmation, to a farcically infinite degree. Philosopher Roland Barthes makes the observation that writing is made up of a ready-formed dictionary of words that are only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely (Barthes 1977, 146). Similarly, an understanding of one particular subject only exists in its interplay with the understanding of other subjects, in such a way as to never rest on any of them, and suggests that conveying the understanding of any subject "can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior,

never original” (Barthes 1977, 146). Such a notion becomes palpable in this situation of a child’s questioning, which is a situation at the heart of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting. We continue to question each other, devolving the capacity for explication and overthrowing intellectual mastery.<sup>9</sup> Our “questions alone will be true questions compelling the autonomous exercise of [our] intelligence” (Rancière 1991, 30) because we have admitted our ignorance.

Confronting the inevitable lack of understanding and knowledge we have is a humbling experience. This experience, of facing how truly little we know, can characterize the beginning of a transformative turn. The transformation of this turn is not only the shattering of personal hubris. In the turn is also the release of an awareness of how little it is possible to know in life, and as such how little everyone else knows as well. The gaining of this personal insight when being questioned by a child, or at a support group for ignorance, could in itself be seen as the discovery of knowledge in the sense that “unknown unknowns” are made into “known unknowns.”<sup>10</sup> Such a taxonomy of ignorance coincides with psychology professor Michael J. Smithson’s articulation of the most popular distinction when it comes to ignorance as being “knowing that we don’t know and not knowing that we don’t know” (Smithson 2008, 210).<sup>11</sup>

Not knowing the unknown is key to the theory of subjugation for Rancière too. He notes in *The Emancipated Spectator*: “what the pupil will always lack, unless she becomes a schoolmistress herself, is knowledge of ignorance—a knowledge of the exact distance separating knowledge from ignorance” (Rancière 2009, 9). This is what empowers the schoolmaster. Reaching the known unknowns through the innocent questioning from a child or from *Ignoramus Anonymous* has come through sharing a reflective conversation and not a superior source, like a teacher or textbook that renders one subordinate. Such a teacher or textbook is always one step ahead in knowing the distance separating knowledge from ignorance. In so doing, this ignorant turning through reciprocal conversation and questioning, as opposed to educational turning, can be seen to represent an emancipation from the everyday hierarchy of intelligence.

In her reflection on the problematic educational turn in contemporary art, Claire Bishop dedicates an entire chapter of *Artificial Hells* to the subject, titled “Pedagogical Projects.” She discusses artists such as Joseph Beuys, Tania Bruguera, and Thomas Hirschhorn in terms of their concern for education in their work. Locally, some of my peers were also showing an interest in the educational turn at the time of my developing *Ignoramus Anonymous*. Lara Thoms’ *The Experts Project* and Dara Gill’s *The Knowledge Barter Experiment* displayed an interest in knowledge economies and information exchange.<sup>12</sup> Both are examples of local Australian artists who have developed projects that implement processes of teaching and learning, encouraging participants to identify areas of their own expertise and positing these participants as teachers, employing the democratic sensibility of many barter-based exchanges where teacher becomes student and vice versa (Meagher 2011, 27). *Ignoramus Anonymous*, on the other hand, is about an emphatic turn away from what is known and can be transferred by teacher or student, or indeed artist or spectator, and a turn toward what is unknown and nontransferable. While Thoms and Gill engaged a playful subversion of the explicator role, this role was still in fact in place. Writer and curator Anneke Jaspers considers this the distinctive counterpoint of *Ignoramus Anonymous*:

Here, the contemplation of ignorance “as a cultural phenomenon” is privileged over teaching and learning. . . . By virtue of its democratic structure, the work also encourages storytelling, speculation and the contestation of different perspectives: a mode of active formation rather than passive reception . . . while it occupies institutions in the business of cultivating expertise, *Ignoramus Anonymous* circumvents the kind of “pedagogical aesthetics” typically associated with the so-called educational turn in art. (Jaspers 2014)

My argument is that *Ignoramus Anonymous* makes this circumvention through the playing with/of a distinctive social form, taking the work beyond being an artwork involving pedagogy and into simultaneously being the autonomous event of a support group. As such, it is important for me to now turn to the voices of others who participated in the event.

## **An Adventure With Others**

The reconfiguring of the support group form and the initial turning toward ignorance begins with the meditation text at the commencement of each *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting. Jaspers refers to this opening as a monologue that “operates as an allegory for the work at large, self-consciously representing its entanglement of play and serious enquiry,” after which my “hand in the remainder of the sessions is unobtrusive” (Jaspers 2014). Indeed, theatre-maker and writer Mark Rogers noted that after this opening the meetings tended to follow a pattern of:

1. Someone revealing their ignorance.
2. Someone else informing them or speculating an answer to the lacked knowledge.
3. The group deciding this practice of “filling in the gap in knowledge” to be not in the spirit of the session and then proceeding without too much more correcting or informing etc. (Rogers 2016)

Rogers’ suggestion of this “spirit” of the group highlights the disappearance of myself as the artist, a disappearance recognized by dramaturge Jennifer Medway, who notes that I wasn’t “positioned as authority from the moment the questioning started and instead became another participant” (Medway 2016). Medway considers that the support group formula has a beginning but not necessarily an ending and that this is important. “It’s a form that has no final requirement (no required denouement/climax/third act/required resolution of a conflict)” (Medway 2016), and so the artist is no longer central once the meeting has been begun. This aligns with Rancière’s assertion that “the circle of emancipation must be begun” (Rancière 1991, 16) in that I am calling the meeting to order, and in so doing drawing the metaphoric circle of emancipation through the quite literal support group circle. For Rogers, there was a feeling of a sense of a script or behavioural code embedded in the social form of the support group. He suggested that perhaps “it is this minimal level of ‘playing along’ that allows the group to be so open with each other . . . using the ‘fiction’ to arrive at the actual feeling of connection” (Rogers 2016). Here Rogers use of the term “fiction” can be read as the representation of a support group that proves real through the community it forms, through a Rancièrian art and non-art tension held in place through the fiction. For Rancière fiction is not a term that “designates the imaginary from the real; it involves a re-framing of the ‘real’ . . . building new relationships between reality and appearance, the individual and the collective” (Rancière 2010, 141), and I believe this to be the fiction of *Ignoramus Anonymous*.

There is a distinction between those who would have experienced the project as a participatory performance and those who would have experienced the project as entirely legitimate support group. Medway wondered if she perhaps thought of herself differently within the project than the rest of the group because she came with knowledge of my past work, and if she felt a sense of superiority because she knew the artistic frame of the project, whereas she was of the opinion that others were present at an actual support group meeting (Medway 2016). This is in contrast to her aforementioned view of me as no longer an authority within the project. In the space of the performance, I was not an authority to Medway, but she internally thought of herself as an authority. Medway also wondered if she retained perceived hierarchies around class, level of education, sobriety, and the mental health status of others present at the meetings she attended.<sup>13</sup> Medway had this inclination seemingly because of her insight into the performance frame. Regardless, both she and Rogers agreed that a certain “levelling of a playing field” was made

through the ignorant turn of the meeting.<sup>14</sup>

Such is the tension that was at play in the meeting that it is impossible to reconcile the project as either wholly “performance” or “support group.”<sup>15</sup> It is also impossible to assess the actual emancipation and transformation attained through the project. Artist Christie Woodhouse wrote of the “glimpse of potential of emancipation” she experienced in the project and the feeling of an “invitation and gentle support” to go further if one wished (Woodhouse 2016). It is this *potential* in the project that I am writing of here and that Rancière wrote of in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster*. Both are about *contexts* for what is potential.

That potential was found for artist Jane Grimley through the opening meditation, which she felt guided her, as she put it, “into a safe place of ignorance with strangers and it felt enough like a playful game that I was ready to be irreverent with my own ignorance and that of others” (Grimley 2016). Grimley, the most frequent attendee of all *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings,<sup>16</sup> “started to consider all meditations as some sweet acceptance of the empty vessel” that she felt individuals ultimately were. Such an expression corresponds with thoughts that arose for me throughout the project: that we are all equally ignorant of the infinite amount of what there is to know. Consider this understanding as represented in the diagram below:

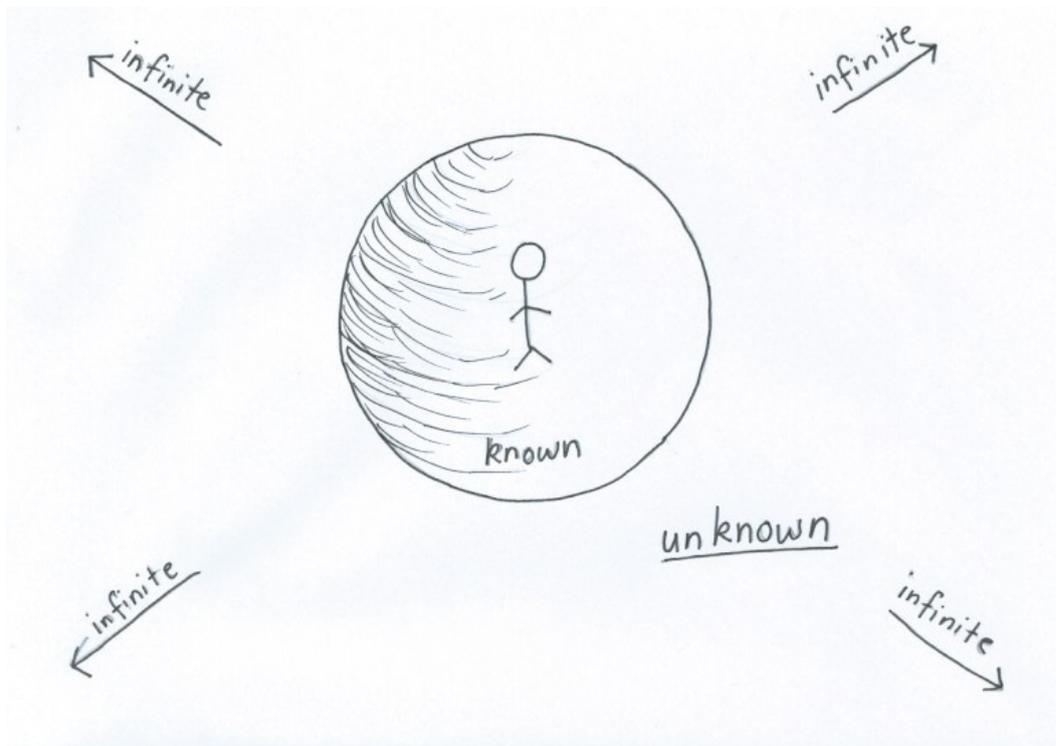


Diagram representing the sphere of the known, surrounded by the infinite unknown.

Some people may feel like they know more than others, or they might actually know more, or what they know might possess more cultural value or cachet and provide them with a higher paying or more lucrative job. In fact, we are all ignorant. Our ignorance surrounds us. We each live in a bubble of belief, familiarity, and specialization, a bubble of what we know.

Consider this bubble as more of a sphere, with an individual at the centre. The sphere can grow, when, for example, swing-dancing classes are taken, or where a country is on a map is learned, or when one becomes aware of certain machinations of how their place of employment works. What is known is increasing, and so too is the sphere that the individual occupies. The sphere might even grow to be bigger than the spheres of others. The size of these spheres becomes a

hierarchy, particularly in how the content is valued by other people in other spheres. One primary evaluation of the content of a sphere is what can earn the most money or provide the most power, but there are also specializations. Take swing dancing as a further example. If an individual has swing dancing in their sphere, then that has a particular value in a particular community. In that community they are a “good dancer” and superior to others, but it might not necessarily translate outside that community.

Or think again of the parent of the pesky child who relentlessly asks the question: “Why?” This parent probably *does* know more and does occupy a larger sphere than the child. Here is another diagram, which we could say represents that parent, with the earlier diagram representing the child:

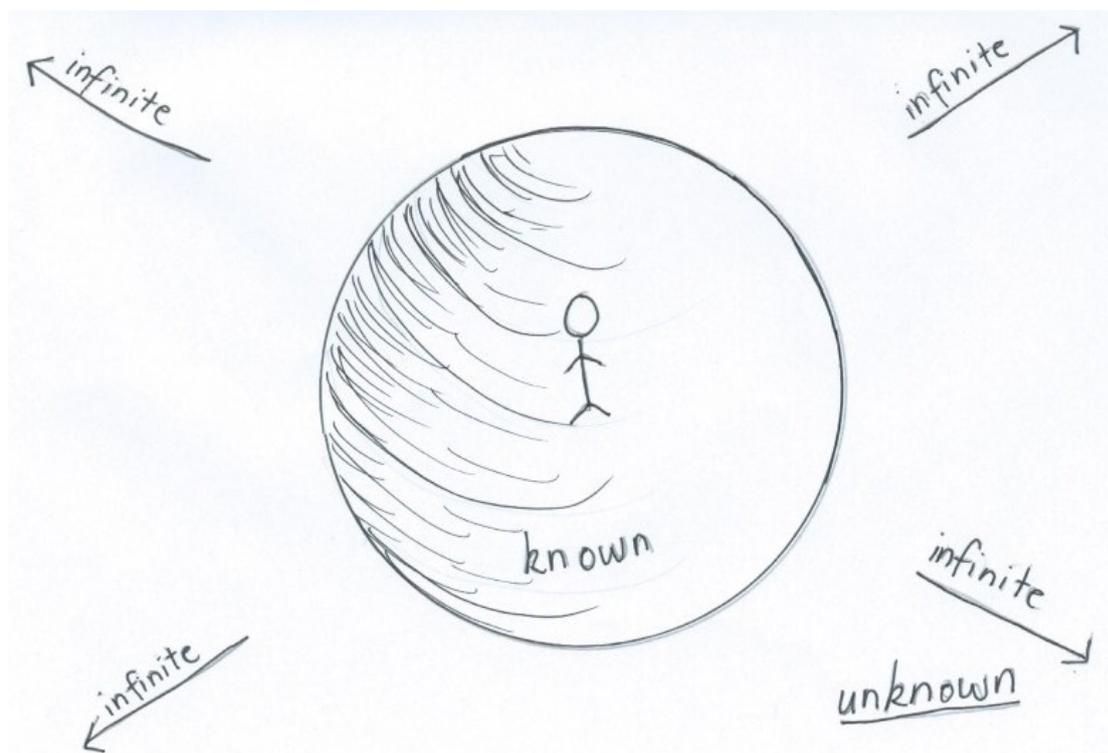


Diagram representing a slightly larger sphere of the known, still surrounded by the infinite unknown.

Regardless of how large the sphere of an individual is, outside that sphere the unknowns are still infinite. For Martin A. Schwartz, a professor of medicine and biomedical engineering, this is a crucial lesson: the scope of things unknown isn't merely vast; it is, for all practical purposes, infinite (Schwartz 2008). In relation to the unknown outside the finitude of the sphere, there is an equality in how little everyone knows together in the bigger scheme of things. A turn toward ignorance, then, which lies in every direction if only the individual would open their eyes and take notice, is an emancipatory one. It collapses both those hierarchies and what informed them in the first place. An individual might know how to save lives, but does he know how to Charleston? Another individual might know how to trade on the stock market, but does she know how to submit a practice-based research paper to a peer-reviewed journal? What is the validity of this knowledge in the first place? How do we all know what we know, how do we know it is true, and what is its value?<sup>17</sup> Schwartz argues that focusing on questions to which you don't know the answer puts you in the awkward situation of appearing ignorant, and that “productive stupidity” means making a choice to be ignorant, i.e. choosing to turn toward the unknown and ask the question. He recognizes that no doubt reasonable levels of confidence and emotional resilience help to ease this transition from learning what other people once discovered

to making your own discoveries. The more comfortable we become with being stupid, the deeper we will wade into the unknown and the more likely we are to make big discoveries (Schwartz 2008). It is my suggestion that *Ignoramus Anonymous* creates this convivial resilience, potentially leading toward transformative discoveries.

Over the course of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting, spheres of the known fluctuate in size, as beyond the generally convivial banter that forms the first layer of the work a sincere self-reflexivity is prompted both during and after the fact (Jaspers 2014).<sup>18</sup> Jaspers notes that “the realisation of some things that we don’t know, or half know, or thought we knew—and how these implicitly reflect certain attitudes and biases—can be acutely unsettling as well as genuinely transformative” (Jaspers 2014). This transformative turning toward taking note of our ignorance means that our spheres of knowledge also grow, as unknown unknowns become known unknowns. Known knowns also fluctuate into known unknowns through personal reflection and questioning ourselves and each other of what we truly understand, without a superior authoritative source such as a teacher or textbook (or Google).

## Conclusion

New knowledge comes about by pushing at the unknown (or at least accidentally dipping your toe in it), and that is always going to be unsettling (or surprising) on some level. On the surface of each of the spheres that we occupy is where the known meets the unknown, where knowledge forms and pedagogy happens. Turning toward what is outside the sphere and relating it to what is inside—this is the form of pedagogy that Rancière wrote about Joseph Jacotot in *The Ignorant Schoolmaster* and what is explored in *Ignoramus Anonymous*. Both are forms of pedagogy that come not from looking toward what is already known by others, but from what is unknown in oneself and from what is happening on the surface of our spheres. Both provide a context rather than content. Turning toward ignorance through *Ignoramus Anonymous* will help these spheres grow, but it will also humble the cultural value of what is inside the sphere and birth the possibility of a democratic community forming through the impossibility of knowing everything outside of each individual’s sphere.

Making this turn through the performance of a support group for ignorance means operating at the dual horizon Bishop observes necessary, of facing toward art and the social field, “testing and revising the criteria we give to both domains in a double finality that avoids the work becoming ‘edu-tainment’ or ‘pedagogical aesthetics’” (Bishop 2012, 274). It is a case of art involving the social process of most effective education, as Barthes suggests of the teaching relation, not of teacher to taught but of those taught to each other (Bishop 2012, 274). *Ignoramus Anonymous* brings these relations into play through the considered choreography of a simple conversation that crystallizes a sense of emancipation.

In a conversation I had with Jaspers at the conclusion of an *Ignoramus Anonymous* meeting she attended at the State Library of New South Wales in 2014, I referred to the social form of the support group as the “conceit” of my project. I meant that it was my artistic device for facilitating what I have described here as an ignorant turn. Jaspers disputed the word, though, feeling that it tended toward metaphorical allusions of the function of the work and away from the genuine support group that the performance was. Here I have shown how *Ignoramus Anonymous* might act as a metaphoric conceit for further exploring Rancière’s theories of intellectual emancipation and be akin to a genuine pedagogical support group that uses conversation to elicit a turn toward and a discovery of that which we hardly pay attention: our ignorance.

## Notes

1. Schneider and Wright propose (2006) the term “productive irritants” as a method for describing interdisciplinary conversations between artists and anthropologists. I use it here to describe conversations I had with serial participants of *Ignoramus Anonymous* that I tracked down in early 2016. *Ignoramus Anonymous* was a free walk-up event, and to honour it as a support group I never documented a single meeting. Given this, I have no record of who attended what meetings. This was slightly problematic for the gathering of information to write a paper. It meant I was only able to engage colleagues in feedback and not any strangers who attended from the general public. This limited feedback was generated through email conversations after I distributed an early draft of this paper to colleagues who I recalled attending multiple *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings.
2. A contemporary rendition of the Jacotot narrative can be observed in the 1999 *Hole in the Wall* project in which poor young Indian children figured out how to use a PC on their own, in a foreign language, and then taught other children. This is recounted by educational researcher Sugata Mitra in his 2007 Ted Talk *Kids Can Teach Themselves*. For more on the project see Mitra (2007).
3. *The Emancipated Spectator* was originally presented, in English, at the opening of the Fifth International Summer Academy of the Arts in Frankfurt in 2004. That text appeared in *Artforum* in 2007 and was then slightly revised and re-published in 2009. I will refer to both these versions.
4. It feels important to note that a large part of this research took place through looking back in 2016 at the accumulation of experiences associated with the project. Analysis is ongoing as *Ignoramus Anonymous* meetings continue to be held sporadically.
5. Both the State Library of New South Wales and Waverley Library, where *Ignoramus Anonymous* went on to be held as monthly meetings, had a regular fixture of public programs into which the project fit.
6. This is part of what Rancière terms the “aesthetic regime” of art, which is “constantly caught in a tension between being specifically art and merging with other forms of activity and being” (Berrebi 2008, 2). For more on Rancière’s regimes of identification of art see Berrebi (2008).
7. I would contend that this analogy is slightly off the mark. “Googling” is about filling in gaps in knowledge and understanding, whereas *Ignoramus Anonymous* is about recognizing, accepting, and sitting with your ignorance, in discussion with others. It is not a place for teaching; it is a space for support. It is a space for wondering rather than answering. After each question is raised at the meeting a conversation unfolds on that subject until the next question is raised.
8. This idea of learning through conversation is not new. It can be seen represented in the extensive writings of Plato’s *Dialogues*, where several characters often dispute a subject by questioning each other. Writing in this way allowed a multiplicity of perspectives to be rendered and enabled the reader to draw their own conclusions as to the most valid (Hare 2010). However, the reader was not taking part in the dialogue. The question being asked in this paper is: What would happen if the live audience were to participate in such a dialogue? For examples of the Plato dialogues see Hare (2010).
9. *Ignoramus Anonymous* attendee Anneke Jaspers recalls discussing questions including “the crisis in Crimea, how an electrical switch operates, why February is a shorter month, the difference between Aboriginal clans and nations, the origin of one’s name, why we have a Senate, how to roast a chicken, the meaning of neoliberalism” and discussing each “with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration and guilt” (Jaspers 2014). Another participant, Jennifer Medway, recalls that when asked, no one in the group knew beyond the first verse of the national anthem and that in so doing a collective ignorance was revealed (Medway 2016). A recurring question I would ask the group was why they believed the Earth was round and revolved around the sun, instead of a flat disc supported on the back of a giant turtle.
10. This is rhetoric adopted from former United States Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld at a US Department of Defense News Briefing in 2002 (Rumsfeld 2002). In the now infamous briefing, Rumsfeld acknowledged that the unknown unknowns were the most difficult category.
11. Smithson prefers the terms “conscious ignorance” and “meta-ignorance” (Smithson 2008, 210), which further suggests that known unknowns are preferable to unknown unknowns because the awareness of an individual of their ignorance means that at least there is a limit to that particular ignorance.

12. More on these projects can be read and viewed online in Meagher (2011).
13. Medway wrote to me of one meeting in particular: “There was a guy there who was for all intents and purposes a bigoted man, but who may also have been coping with a mental illness. . . . What started as a tirade against Muslims became accounts of having seen angels and been told information by voices no one else could hear. This was combined with a woman who . . . was there for an argument, there to be open with her opinions and thoughts and who challenged this man quite readily. It was clear that neither of them had come to a performance . . . they were all there and committed as attendees of a support group for ignorance. This conversation went on without mediation from you. At no point did you become an authority and break the understanding of us all being on the same level. In fact, it only ended when the man left (a very relieving moment for us all)” (Medway 2016).
14. Both Rogers and Medway used the analogy of the levelling of a playing field.
15. *Ignoramus Anonymous* was eventually presented in the form of monthly meetings at the State Library NSW and Waverley Council Library (Sydney), and then at the Performance Space “Sonic Social” program at the Museum of Contemporary Art (Sydney), as part of the Festival of Live Art at Arts House (Melbourne), at Launceston Library as part of the Junction Arts Festival (Launceston), at The Wheeler Centre (Melbourne) and at the Bondi Pavilion Gallery (Sydney). In this paper, I focus just on the library presentations of the project, which the project was originally made for and most conducive within. The important tension between art and non-art is retainable within a library because, as mentioned in Berrebi (2008), “art has not been attributed a specific place” in such a context.
16. Grimley wrote: “I liked using them [the meetings] as places to bring dates. I wanted to learn about how my dates thought. Which ideas and people attracted them in the group, and what they might offer as their own ignorance. I wanted to see if they liked to think in interesting patterns. I liked showing off my ignorance too” (Grimley 2016).
17. Grimley noted of *Ignoramus Anonymous*, the appearance of the “subjective nature of all experience” and that the transfer of knowledge always requires a great deal of faith in others (Grimley 2016).
18. On this durational character, Woodhouse recalls “when leaving the room, the conversation went on in my head as I thought of many other things that I was ignorant of or could have brought up, that weren’t triggered at the time” (Woodhouse 2016).

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