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# idea journal

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co-constructing body-environments

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vol. 17, no. 02

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2020

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the journal of IDEA: the Interior design +  
interior architecture educators' association





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body-environments



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**the journal of IDEA: the interior design +  
interior architecture educators' association**

**about**

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- (b) being an authority on, and advocate for, interior design/interior architecture/spatial design education and research.

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**co-constructing body-environments:  
provocation**

Presenters at *Body of Knowledge: Art and Embodied Cognition Conference (BoK2019)* hosted by Deakin University, Melbourne, June 2019) are invited to submit contributions to a special issue of idea journal "Co-Constructing Body-Environments" to be published in December 2020. The aim of the special issue is to extend the current discussions of art as a process of social cognition and to address the gap between descriptions of embodied cognition and the co-construction of lived experience.

We ask for papers, developed from the presentations delivered at the conference, that focus on interdisciplinary connections and on findings arising from intersections across research practices that involve art and theories of cognition. In particular, papers should emphasize how spatial art and design research approaches have enabled the articulation of a complex understanding of environments, spaces and experiences. This could involve the spatial distribution of cultural, organisational and conceptual structures and relationships, as well as the surrounding design features.

Contributions may address the questions raised at the conference and explore:

- + How do art and spatial practices increase the potential for knowledge transfer and celebrate diverse forms of embodied expertise?
- + How the examination of cultures of practice, Indigenous knowledges and cultural practices offer perspectives on inclusion, diversity, neurodiversity, disability and social justice issues?
- + How the art and spatial practices may contribute to research perspectives from contemporary cognitive neuroscience and the philosophy of mind?
- + The dynamic between an organism and its surroundings for example: How does art and design shift the way knowledge and thinking processes are acquired, extended and distributed?
- + How art and design practices demonstrate the ways different forms of acquiring and producing knowledge intersect?

These and other initial provocations for the conference can be found on the conference web-site: <https://blogs.deakin.edu.au/bok2019/cfp/>.

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# introduction: unknowingly, a threshold-crossing movement

**Julianna Preston**

Executive Editor

*idea journal*

It is in this special issue that the editorial board holds true to our promise to expand the horizons and readership of *idea journal* while reaching out to associated and adjacent art, design and performance practices and drawing connections to seemingly distant disciplines. The articles in this issue have provenance in a 2019 conference event, Bodies of Knowledge (BOK), which was guided by a similar interdisciplinary ethos. With an emphasis on cultures of practice and communities of practitioners that offer perspectives on inclusion, diversity/neurodiversity and disability, this conference, and this subsequent journal issue, aim to increase knowledge transfer between diverse forms of embodied expertise, in particular, between neuroscience and enactive theories of cognition.

This brief description suggests that there are shared issues, subjects and activities that have the potential of generating new understanding in cross-, inter- and trans-disciplinary affiliations and collaborations. My experience in these modes of inquiry points to the importance of identifying what is shared and what is not amongst vocabulary, concepts, pedagogies and methods. Holding these confluences and diverges without resorting to strict definition, competition or judgement of right and wrong often affords greater understanding and empathy amongst individuals to shape a collective that is diverse in its outlooks, and hopefully, curious as to what it generates together because of that diversity.

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The breadth of the knowledge bases represented within this issue necessitated that the peer reviewer list expanded once again like the previous issue. It was in the process of identifying reviewers with appropriate expertise that the various synapses between scholarly and artistic practices became evident. It is these synapses that shape sturdy bridges between the journal's existing readership, which is predominantly academics and students in interior design, interior architecture, spatial design and architecture, and the wide range of independent scholars and practitioners, academics, and students attracted to BOK's thematic call for papers, performative lectures and exhibitions. At the risk of being reductive to the complexity and nuances in the research to follow, I suggest that the following terms and concerns are central to this issue, aptly inferred by its title, 'Co-Constructing Body-Environments': spatiality; subjectivity; phenomenology; processual and procedural practice; artistic research; critical reflection; body: experience. All of these are frequent to research and practice specific to interiors. In this issue, however, we find how these terms and concerns are situated and employed in other fields, in other ways and for other purposes.

This is healthy exercise. To stretch one's reach, literally and metaphorically is to travel the distance between the me and the you, to be willingly open to what might eventuate. Imagine shaking the hand of a stranger—a somatic experience known to register peaceful intent, respect, courage, warmth, pressure, humour, nervous energy, and so much more. This threshold-crossing movement is embodied and spatial; it draws on a multitude of small yet complex communication sparks well before verbal impulses ensue. This significant bodily gesture sets the tone for what might or could happen. Based on my understanding of the research presented in 'Co-Constructing Body-Environments,' I propose that this is a procedure in the Gins and Arakawa sense that integrates theory and practice as a hypothesis for 'questioning all possible ways to observe the body-environment in order to transform it.'<sup>01</sup> I call this as *unknowingly*—a process that takes the risk of not knowing, not being able to predict or predetermine, something akin to the spectrum of 'throwing caution to the wind' and 'sailing close to



the wind'. My use of the word 'unknowingly' embraces intuition where direct access to unconscious knowledge and pattern-recognition, unconscious cognition, inner sensing and insight have the ability to understand something without any need for conscious reasoning. Instinct. The word *unknowingly* also affords me to invoke the 'unknowing' element of this interaction—to not know, to not be aware of, to not have all the information (as if that was possible)—an acknowledgement of human humility. I borrow and adapt this facet of unknowingly from twentieth-century British writer Alan Watts:

This I don't know, is the same thing as, I love. I let go. I don't try to force or control. It's the same thing as humility. If you think that you understand Brahman, you do not understand. And you have yet to be instructed further. If you know that you do not understand, then you truly understand.<sup>02</sup>

*Unknowingly* also allows me to reference 'un' as a tactic of learning that suspends the engrained additive model of learning. Though I could refer to many other scholarly sources to fuel this concept, here I am indebted to Canadian author Scott H. Young's pithy advice on how to un-learn:

This is the view that what we think we know about the world is a veneer of sense-making atop a much deeper strangeness. The things we think we know, we often don't. The ideas, philosophies and truths that guide our lives may be convenient approximations, but often the more accurate picture is a lot stranger and more interesting.<sup>03</sup>

In his encouragement to unlearn—dive into strangeness, sacrifice certainty, boldly expose oneself to randomness, mental discomfort, instability, to radically rethink that place/ your place/ our place, suspend aversions to mystery—Young's examples from science remind us that:



Subatomic particles aren't billiard balls, but strange, complex-valued wavefunctions. Bodies aren't vital fluids and animating impulses, but trillions of cells, each more complex than any machine humans have invented. Minds aren't unified loci of consciousness, but the process of countless synapses firing in incredible patterns.<sup>04</sup>

In like manner to the *BOK2019* conference which was staged as a temporally infused knowledge-transfer event across several days, venues, geographies and disciplines, I too, ingested the materials submitted for this issue in this spirit of unknowingly. The process was creative, critical, intuitive, generative and reflective—all those buzz words of contemporary research—yet charged with substantial respect and curiosity for whatever unfolded, even if it went against the grain of what I had learned previously. For artists, designers, architects, musicians, and performers reading this journal issue, especially academics and students, this territory of inquiry may feel familiar to the creative experience and the increasing demands (and desires) to account for how one knows what one knows in the institutional setting. ‘Explain yourself,’ as the review or assessment criteria often states. If you are faced having to annotate your creative practice or to critically reflect on aspects that are so embedded in your making that you are unaware of them, I encourage you to look amongst the pages of this journal issue for examples of how others have grappled with that task such that the process is a space of coming to unknow and know, unknowingly.

**Figure 01:**

Meeting the horizon; A still image from *Shore Variations*, a 2018 film by Claudia Kappenberg that reimagines *Waning*, a 2016 live art performance by Julieanna Preston. <https://vimeo.com/user11308386>.



There are a few people I would like to acknowledge before you read further. First, huge gratitude to the generosity of the peer reviewers, for the time and creative energy of guest editors Jondi Keane, Rea Dennis and Meghan Kelly (who have made the process so enjoyable and professional), for the expertise of the journal's copy editor Christina Houen and Graphic Designer Jo Bailey, and to AADR for helping to expand the journal's horizons.

Okay, readers, shake hands, consider yourself introduced, welcome into the *idea journal* house, and let's share a very scrumptious meal.

### **acknowledgements**

*I am forever grateful for what life in Aotearoa/ New Zealand brings. With roots stretching across the oceans to North America, Sweden, Wales and Croatia, I make my home between Kāpiti Island and the Tararua Ranges, and in Te Whanganui-A-Tara/ Wellington. I acknowledge the privilege that comes with being educated, employed, female and Pākehā, and the prejudices and injustices that colonialism has and continues to weigh on this land and its indigenous people. I am committed to on-going learning and practicing of Kaupapa Māori.*

### **notes**

- 01 Jondi Keane, 'An Arakawa and Gins Experimental Teaching Space; A Feasibility Study,' *INFLeXions* 6 (2012), accessed 29 October 2020, [http://www.inflexions.org/n6\\_keane.html](http://www.inflexions.org/n6_keane.html).
- 02 Alan Watts, *Creating Who You Are* (Video) (n.d.), accessed 29 October 2020, <https://vimeo.com/76888920>.
- 03 Scott H. Young, 'The Art of Unlearning' (2018), accessed 29 October 2020, <https://www.scotthyoung.com/blog/2018/04/12/the-art-of-unlearning/>.
- 04 Young, 'The Art of Unlearning.'



# shared reality: a phenomenological inquiry

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## abstract

This article presents a phenomenological inquiry in the extreme environments of the Arctic winter and of 'Shared Reality'—a hybrid form of virtual reality merging spherical video documentation, virtual reality and present reality. The inquiry was carried out in two parallel spheres of ownness: one in the Arctic and the other in the Shared Reality. The outcome was documented using the footage of a spherical 360° camera in the Arctic and thick description to provide accounts of the lived experience in both spheres of ownness. Shared Reality facilitates a perspective into phenomenology that incorporates multiple key ideas of several important thinkers. The inquiry tests the phenomenological perspectives of Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, and examines the coupling between body, environment, and lived experience as well as the creative process. The combined experience brings together parallel states of active coping, inhabiting a shared phenomenological field and sphere of ownness.

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## keywords:

shared reality, phenomenology, experience, coupling, sphere of ownness



## introduction

This article will explore the way in which the phenomenological theories of Husserl,<sup>01</sup> Heidegger,<sup>02</sup> and Merleau-Ponty<sup>03</sup> translate to the human experience of an act of creation in extreme environments such as painting in the Arctic Winter (Figure 01) and painting in Shared Reality, the latter being a new term proposed by the author to denote a hybrid form of virtual reality that merges spherical video documentation, virtual reality, and present reality. The article then presents theoretical underpinnings that provide the reader with an overview of the relevant concepts. It is followed by a section on practical underpinnings which outlines some of the prior examples of plein-air painters in the Arctic. Subsequently, a phenomenological inquiry will be presented as two accounts of thick description of spheres of ownness—in the Arctic winter and in Shared Reality—engendering hermeneutical context, while the accompanying images will provide documentary illustrations to the thick descriptions to enable the reader to visualise the described lived experience more vividly and objectively. In the final section, these accounts will be discussed and related to phenomenology, drawing insights from the lived experience in the two spheres of ownness. The author proposes that *Shared Reality* presents a potentially new method of exploring such concepts as habituation, coupling, affect, and the creative process, among other things, as well as testing extant phenomenological theories.

## theoretical underpinnings: Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Heidegger

An important goal of philosophy is to question the nature of perception, cognition and consciousness. A branch of philosophy that is particularly focused on consciousness is phenomenology. Phenomenology as understood by Husserl and Merleau-Ponty directs its path to understanding consciousness through first explaining 'lived experience.'<sup>04</sup>

Husserl referred to a 'sphere of ownness,'<sup>05</sup> denoting an individual who is experiencing phenomena in a unique way with a unique perspective. Two observers can agree that they are experiencing the same phenomena, yet each observer's experience remains unique to themselves. To this end, Husserl saw experience as a subject relating to an object and an object relating to a subject within a sphere of ownness, essentially shifting the perspective of experience around a phenomenon to better understand one's consciousness.<sup>06</sup>

Merleau-Ponty was the first to consider the body in phenomenology,<sup>07</sup> inverting the dualist perspective which separates mind from body<sup>08</sup> and looks at consciousness and experience solely through the lens of the mind as distinct from the body. Merleau-Ponty asserted that, before all else, we exist and are thrown into this world as a body.<sup>09</sup> Our experience and consciousness within a phenomenological field is primordial. Experience and consciousness are the result of *inhabiting* a phenomenological field.<sup>10</sup> Being is metonymous to being situated.



Heidegger asserted that to understand your consciousness of a phenomenon you must not only experience it in a sphere of ownness, but also 'cope' with it.<sup>11</sup> You cannot be detached from your experience. Human experience is underpinned by habituation.<sup>12</sup> We come into this world with no experience of phenomena and a fundamental part of our development revolves around habituation. The development of essential skills such as the acts of walking and talking are huge endeavours of habituation, yet few of us stop to consider how we walk or talk: the process is functionally transparent and requires little conscious input. Heidegger referred to this functional transparency in acting as a 'ready-at-hand'<sup>13</sup> experience or mastery. Ready-at-hand experiences are an important aspect of our consciousness but offer little phenomenological insight, as we aren't aware of our experience. What is needed to explore phenomenology is an approach to examine experience where we find ourselves de-habituated, or as Heidegger put it, 'unready-at-hand'.<sup>14</sup> In coping with a lack of habituation we become more aware of our experience and of our consciousness.<sup>15</sup>

An unhabituated plein-air landscape painter in the depth of the Arctic winter, as discussed below, finds their usual practice in new and totally unfamiliar territory, suggesting a suitable framework to study lived experience and active coping.

### **practical underpinnings: painters in the arctic**

Painting in the Arctic is a rare but not novel endeavour.<sup>16</sup> Many artists find their practice and draw creativity from the cold and extreme. Part-explorer part-artist, the likes of Jackson, Berg, and Aagaard travelled the northern reaches of the world to capture their beauty and document their wonders. Even Monet spent two months exploring and painting Norway.<sup>17</sup> Despite Monet's dislike of the snow and the freezing conditions, he still practised plein-air painting, returning from his sessions entirely white with his beard covered in icicles. Contemporary artist/explorers, such as McEown<sup>18</sup> and Trépanier,<sup>19</sup> have documented their travels and experiences capturing the Arctic with extensive videos and travel journals. These artists are driven by the allure of the wonders of the Arctic and their interest in adventure, wildlife, conservation, and the culture of the Polar Regions.<sup>20</sup>

Creating art in the extremes of the Arctic winter requires considerable adaptation. With temperatures fluctuating between -15°C and -35°C it is easy to get hypothermia and frostbite, so a lot of protective clothing and gear are needed. Paints, painting media, tools and surfaces react in various ways to the extreme cold. Paint colours change both chemically and phenomenologically. Paint mixing and application isn't consistent, as the state of water changes at a variable rate. This also affects the control and haptic feedback of brushes: the water within the hairs and between the bristles freezes differently. Flexibility and fluidity are fleeting.



The Arctic artists mentioned above have spent a long time experiencing these conditions and have modified their approach and thinking towards painting to master their environment and conditions. The best approach to painting in the Arctic is to only do it in summer. The light of the midnight sun is consistent, the weather more stable and there is more life in general to observe. Even then, a combination of special equipment and procedures enable these artists to continue their creative pursuits:<sup>21</sup> brushes need to be kept oiled and wrapped in plastic, painting is done within protective tents, cover shields are used to protect the painted surface, and insulated pots are used to resist the freezing of media.<sup>22</sup>

Two accounts of the author's experience of painting in the Arctic that reflect a different approach are presented below.

### **account of the sphere of ownness in the arctic**

#### **23 January 2019, Koppangen, Norway**

I walked for an hour into the fjord to the middle of a naked forest of bare branches that stood out like cracks in the otherwise infinite white. It's difficult to explain the strange sensations that you have when you're totally alone. Given that it is an Arctic winter, the sun never actually shows its face. I had not seen the sun at all since arriving here. And yet, from reflected light already at 7am there is enough light to navigate and find your way around,

even though it is strictly speaking still very dark (in relative terms). This was my first true experience of losing myself out in the immense whiteness. I had not experienced walking in fresh snow before. I had not really had much experience with snow at all. I was wearing special snowshoes and these were quite difficult to put on, very stiff, frozen over with snow, featuring a cantankerous clasp release mechanism that had a mind of its own. It was an extremely cold day; I think the day started with about -12°C. Any action, like taking my gloves off, was a difficult and sometimes painful experience.

Snow that hasn't been walked on can have any amount of distance between where you are about to step and where the actual ground is. The locals had told me of tree caves: potentially deadly traps that you could fall into. A tree cave is where the snow falls over a tree and covers up the tree to the point where it levels up to the top of the tree. You don't realise that you're walking above a tree. Without snowshoes on, you can puncture the snow, fall into the crevasse underneath the tree, and then, a massive quantity of snow falls on top of you crushing you... If the weight of snow doesn't crush you, the sheer volume of frozen material would suck all heat out, killing you in a matter of minutes. Which is not the most enjoyable thing to consider when you're going for a walk.



My head is filled with these horror stories of avalanches and snow caves that are everywhere. I was very anxious about my footwear that seemed to be the one thing that I was concerning myself with more than anything else: my feet and how I walked. I had pre-boarded the paper for watercolour prior to leaving to save that complicated step (Figure 01). I had a limited supply of water, two layers of gloves and a scarf. I had seven layers of clothing, but I was quite concerned about my feet and hands as they were the most exposed parts of my body. So that's what a lot of my thinking was concentrating on. I settled down to start painting (Figure 02). I used the toboggan as an insulator to keep my bottom from freezing in the snow while seated.

I had brought along a spherical (360°) camera to capture my sphere of ownness. I had positioned the camera adjacent on a tripod, so it was

observing me: my future reflective self. To capture this moment in all perspectives, body, environment, and act (Figure 03). I tried to paint what I was experiencing. The most difficult

**Figure 01:**

A pre-boarded watercolour board in the extreme environment of the Arctic winter. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

**Figure 02:**

Experience in a sphere of ownness: sitting down to paint the forest in front of a fjord. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.



aspect of the process was finding something to get a grip on, something that I could identify; I felt an urge to associate. There really wasn't that much there to associate with. There were these incredibly complicated, bare trees, that were clearly a point of some structure, but I found it quite difficult and disturbing to conceptualise and represent them. Something that in the studio I would normally find quite easy. In this field of undulating white, I felt myself drawn to very high contrast objects. Something to grasp. There was a gate that I could see in the distance and certain trees that stood out distinctively. My feeling in general was that of wanting to just focus on these high contrast, strong, comfortable objects, which relieved me from the intensity and the extent of the whiteness, of the amount of snow that was presented in front of me. I needed something to hold on to (Figure 04).

### 29 January 2019, Koppangen, Norway

When I was working with the paint, the paints tended to become very granular like the snow (Figure 05). If they did not freeze as they were moving around in the palette, the paints tended to behave like powdery sand. The colours were difficult to resolve, and they appeared particularly dark. My choice for colour was hidden within the nature of the paint: once the paint was on the palette, my colour judgment was limited, because the colours were dark and the

**Figure 03:**

Spherical camera capturing the process of actively coping in a sphere of oneness. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

**Figure 04:**

The high contrast frozen artefact of a painting of the forest. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.



water was frozen, the pure pigment appeared a uniform dark to my eyes. I did see glimpses of the colours revealed when I applied them to the canvas, but there was not much I could do after that. My decision making seemed to be more focused on getting things finished and any strokes applied to paper were immediately bonded and frozen.

Additional strokes, instead of mixing or developing, layered like wax, creating strata of pigment locked in frozen strokes. My brush stuck to the palette, then to the canvas. I remember having a very strong sense of depression developing in the course of that day. I returned with a canvas, thick with strata of coloured ice (Figure 04) and a deep feeling of discontent. As part of my collaboration with the environment, as a final developing stage, I left the frozen painting to melt (Figure 06).

### 21 January 2019, near Årøya, Norway

When walking in the snow of an Arctic winter without sun, one of the most interesting phenomena is the light. At no time does the sun show her face, yet her presence is felt. The sky is full and bright from 7 am until 3 pm. The world is a pool of reflected and diffracted light that rapidly changes and undulates over the white canvas of the Arctic. Curiously, this display is largely absent in photographs.

**Figure 05:**

The watercolour paints in the snow.  
Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

**Figure 06:**

The defrosted artefact of a painting of the forest (see the frozen counterpart at Figure 04). Image: Jack Parry, 2019.



The ramp to the boat was a lot steeper than it looked from afar and walking on the fresh snow down a narrow aluminium plank was perhaps the most unsettling of all, as there was quite a gap between the pier and the ramp, and through the clear water, active sea life undulated, small fish and large starfish. The pier gave to my weight and I quickly negotiated my way down to the base, where a short figure clad in thick blue winter gear was actively preparing the boat for fishing. I stepped into the boat with all the expensive camera gear and it lurched to the side, groaning under my weight. In the centre of the boat was a rectangular metal box that I quickly established to be a good centre of gravity and safe place to exert myself upon the little boat. As we left the harbour, I put my bags in the hold. I settled myself down outside to set up my sphere of ownness (Figure 07). I could feel the water around me trying to drain our warmth. The wind: wild, salty, and corrosive.

In the distance, on the banks of the fjords, there was an odd aberration: a vertical mirage. The whole coastline for several metres above looked like a giant barcode. The cold air was refracting light vertically, magnifying the waterline, expanding the details of the shore. The boat arrived at the outer reach of the bay and pushed into the open Arctic waters. Even then the massive fjords still dominated the skyline, exerting their own gravitational pull on us insects.

**Figure 07:**

Painting on a boat surrounded by snow and fishermen. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

The locals I had spoken with told of the influence the fjords had over their feelings. Something deeply affecting them: they could not cope living away from the fjords. Life elsewhere was always more exciting and culturally rich, but ultimately, the pull of the mountains brought them back.

I settled on the floor of the boat and spread out with my water bottle, paints and mixing trays within easy reach. I knew that my water would freeze, but it didn't happen as quickly as I had imagined. I poured some water onto the mixing tray and it stayed liquid for several minutes.



The water froze from the peripheries, forming a shell on the top of the water freezing inwards. This gave me more time with a mixing medium than I had expected. The water, however, froze much faster on the brush itself, rendering the brush rigid and stick-like. The brush head grew in size the longer I painted, as layers of ice compounded.

There was an excited sense of urgency to this creation, as I had no flexibility in my decision making. A poor choice of colour remains part of the image, as if the ice had no patience. In the colder temperature, the paints hardened quicker and appeared darker and more desaturated on the palette. The hardened paints also took on a sandy quality when mixing, resulting in a dark particulate, whose colour was somewhat concealed. It was of course quite a spectacle to the fishermen to see the sprawl of paint tubes, pale snow and pools of fish blood. Application of mixed paint was frustrating, as the sandy mixture either didn't take to the paper or it froze to the paper if it was fluid enough. I found myself in a very vulnerable state as the fishermen started to gather and narrate as I struggled to reflect some kind of likeness.

The Arctic waters were turgid, a deep dark dynamic emerald green that fluctuated rapidly and randomly. I had no point of reference. It was increasingly difficult to discern what

I had already painted, as each new wash laid on opaque and crystalline, forming smooth sections, lumps of crystalline pigment blocks, and the environmental light fluctuated at a mad pace with blues becoming pinks in a matter of seconds. The ostensibly white environment was a complex matrix of pinks, purples, yellows and blues, offset by the living deep green of the waters (Figure 08). The constant movement of the boat was disorienting; each time I raised my head I was met with a new reality. The horizon had moved and the forms I had anchored on were both displaced and disguised by a new and different light. The colours were intense and throbbed from blue to pink and then deep purple. The world undulating above me, with frustration mounting, I turned to snow as a mixing medium as all my water had frozen.

**Figure 08:**

A complex matrix of pinks, purples, yellows and blues, offset by the living deep green of the waters approximated on the image taken with the spherical camera. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.



The snow readily sucked up the pigment but would not let go of it: only compounding the struggle, bonding and occluding making the tableau thick and opaque. In a last vain attempt, I inverted the useless brush, the tip served as a chisel to hack through the ice and regain some semblance of control over this creation. The painting froze thick (Figure 09) and I was left with a bitter sense of defeat after hours of arm wrestling.

**Figure 09:**  
The frozen artefact of a painting of the Arctic Ocean. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

The artefact was left to defrost, leaving with it a chronology of my struggle and the fingerprints of my encounter (Figure 10).

#### **24 January 2019, Bertholmen, Norway**

Alf somehow knew the auroras were coming. I was hustled out in the middle of the night into the fishing boat and found myself staring at the empty

**Figure 10:**  
The defrosted artefact of a painting of the Arctic Ocean. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

sky, enveloped in six layers of warm clothing, as the boat was chugging into the open waters of the Arctic sea. We were headed for the deserted island of Bertholmen, a supposed Nazi outpost. A place feared for both its history of bloodshed and the headless ghosts believed to wander there aimlessly through the night. It was significantly colder: they had registered  $-30^{\circ}\text{C}$ , yet it felt no different with all my layers. Escaping the artificial light of the mainland, I experienced true darkness for the first time in my life. The tiny island lit only by the moon was covered with virgin snow. It had a jetty and a small shelter, the old stronghold.

As I stepped off the jetty, the snow collapsed under my weight, my foot penetrating the invisible depths up to



my hips. After an eternity of struggling we made it to the shelter. The sky was clear, and the moon glistened over the open sea. Alf knew the auroras were coming, but not now. We made a fire and enjoyed coffee, dried halibut, and chocolate. The chimney was somewhat blocked by the snow, so some of the smoke poured out into the room giving it a medieval ambience, harshly contrasted by the blue light of mobile phones bobbing around the room. As if part of a schedule, the drinking abruptly stopped and Alf pushed us out of the shelter, tramping across to the bay with eyes fixed on the sky.

All was still, dark and deathly quiet: then gently it came. First as a web of light tracing the unseen structure of the sky. Waves of silken light erupted from folds of nothingness, rolling, gyrating, thrusting and melding within one another to form an expanse of colour and pure energy. I lay on my back in the snow, eyes wide open. I felt a presence, a caress, movements with the essence of femininity and grace. The lights occupied all depths, they encircled the full moon with blue ribbons, pulsating and evaporating, only to reappear close to my chest with fingers outstretched that stroked and faded into empty space. It was everywhere and nowhere. In the darkness you could see all of space as interconnected threads. This was no phenomenon of light and radiation: the movement of the aurora gave rise to a feeling of being around

something that was sentient, something that had purpose, and something that had, not necessarily motivation, but certainly a structure to itself.

This mass of energy moved with corporeal dynamics and a sense that I could associate with feelings and movements. Movements of a human or an animal, not a gas of excited electrons. It exuded all of the qualities of a mother, warmth, safety, even love. It moved with a living essence. This perhaps wasn't the ideal time to start painting, but the air was filled with creativity. The auroras were at their fullest. I was able to undertake only a few rushed attempts at expressing myself, as it was so cold. The sky was filled with colour, yet to my canvas there was no light. Even when the auroras were at their strongest, they only illuminated my working area for a very brief period. I just did what I could. With no eyes for my painting, I had to paint with my body awareness, I painted the experience it gave me. This gave out brown and strong dark hues as a palette; no reflection of the coloured spectacle, yet energetic and warm (Figure 11).



**Figure 11:**  
The aurora painted in pitch  
darkness. Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

### **account of the sphere of ownness in shared reality**

**Figure 12:**  
A photo of the author painting in  
Shared Reality in a VR studio in  
Melbourne. Image: Disruptr, 2019.

#### **3 July 2019, VR Studio, Melbourne**

The stairs down to the basement were  
dirty and littered with rubbish. The

basement itself a dank and unfriendly  
place that had been repurposed into  
a virtual reality space. I struggled into  
the room wielding a large wooden box  
full of painting materials and nested  
myself on the carpet (Figure 12). The  
virtual reality system wasn't meant for  
this and I didn't expect that this would  
be easy. The system itself is set up to  
explore and interact with virtual worlds  
made of polygons and pixels. Instead, I  
created a virtual world of my own: my  
Shared Reality. I mapped the spherical  
video of my experience in the Arctic to a  
polygonal sphere in this virtual world so  
I could be within my sphere of ownness.  
I enabled the headset's calibration  
mode so that I could simultaneously see  
my hands, my body and my tools within  
the documented world of the Arctic. It  
took quite a while to make it work, but  
when it did, it was breath-taking. Almost  
like a departed spirit, I hovered over my  
own body.

I appeared calm, sitting in the snow,  
frozen in body and attention. To sit in  
two worlds at once is unsettling. The  
sense of calm with the frozen world  
was met with anxious pangs as foreign  
objects presented themselves: chairs,  
concrete columns, tables, computers,  
drifting in and out of my awareness  
like the aurora (Figure 13). Then an  
apparition, my own arms, my own  
hands, floating above my body in the  
snow. Objects from both realities fought  
for my attention, but the beauty of my  
Arctic sphere of ownness took hold of



my senses and I felt at one with this world. My body was in the basement, but I felt it elsewhere.

Sitting on the musty carpet with my head strung back by electrical cables like a creature in the Matrix, I felt comfortable and contemplated my subject. The creative process was repeated within this shared realm. A shared moment in time, space, body and experience. I sat as I sat in the forest: cross legged with my boarded paper on my lap, tools spread around me (Figure 14). It was a weird situation, where my body didn't have the skills to go to the right place or do the right action. My perception was indeterminate: confused, unstable and ambiguous.

Then something clicked: I was able to shift my awareness from one reality to another, from my view of the forest to my hands and paper. The closer a tangible object was to my body, the harder it was to discern its location, shape and colour. I had my tools and paints laid out in a circle around me. It was frustrating and tiresome to locate them by sight, but I developed a spatial sense of their distribution around me, my sight assisted by my hands. My paper, however, was very clear, placed before me but I found increasing reliance on my body. I could turn my gaze and focus on the paints and tools but found it easier to stay with my attention filtered on one reality, only

**Figure 13:**  
A view within Shared Reality.  
Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

**Figure 14:**  
Forest painted (and as seen) in  
Shared Reality. Image: Jack Parry,  
2019.



permitting my attention to shift to my painting. The freedom to approach this subject again with colours that made sense accompanied by free movements was a relief.

I don't know exactly when I started to feel the sadness. The lonely and dour heaviness that I had felt while painting in the Arctic. I was absorbed, lost in the detail of the trees and the forms and colours of the mountains. Lost in the posture of painting and the shape of myself. Adrift it came to me... in the Arctic, the feeling came and went. This current sadness held me for almost a day after the Shared Reality. I am an emotional person; I do feel sad like everyone does now and then. But with this experience came a deep sense of despair.

The experience complete, the mask<sup>23</sup> lifted, and the ordeal over; I am left in the basement, with the fading afternoon light, alone with my artwork (Figures 15 and 16). But this painting is not mine: the only thought that comes to me. I feel nothing for this piece of paper.

It is clearly a depiction of the same subject, the same time, and the same world. The colours are different, which makes sense, but this doesn't explain the utter sense of creative disconnection. When I was there in that sphere, it wasn't a painting, it was a bond. It was the embodiment of my experience and the coupling to

my inhabited world. But here in the basement it is a piece of paper: with no love, no feeling and no meaning.

I wore the mask again, and there, with the feeling of a parent finding a lost child, I found my creation. With the

**Figure 15:**

Forest painted in Shared Reality (as seen with a naked eye). Image: Jack Parry, 2019.

**Figure 16:**

Arctic Ocean painted in Shared Reality (as seen with a naked eye). Image: Jack Parry, 2019.



mask, within the world where I had created it, it was mine, my offspring. In the real tangible world, a mere object, but in Shared Reality, it was a warm and living entity. This feeling returned again and again with each new visit to Shared Reality. The body coupling giving rise to strong, long-lasting affective states. The artefacts of creation in Shared Reality: a contextual coupling, ghosts that only hold meaning in another phenomenological world.

In a sphere of ownness engaged in active coping, inhabiting a phenomenological field, it came to me: coupling: a Shared Reality. I experienced an alignment of body, action and environment that against my will, against my consciousness, resonated and brought forth a full experience.

## discussion

Virtual Reality is not without its critics in phenomenology,<sup>24</sup> viewing it as a medium of disembodiment.<sup>25</sup> A polygonal world experienced only by the eyes, ears, and digital peripherals, denying the conscious body. It precludes any kind of lived experience, as the body is numb, a phantom limb in a digital limbo. The virtual reality experience, *Osmose*,<sup>26</sup> was one of the first to try to integrate the body into a lived virtual reality. The subject was immersed into a vast synthetic digital world, engaged with, and navigated through the world through breath and body orientation.<sup>27</sup> 'Immersants often feel as if they have rediscovered an aspect of themselves,

of being alive in the world, which they had forgotten, an experience which many find surprising, and some very emotional.'<sup>28</sup> What was initially a strange and foreign world became a peaceful place where the subjects felt connected and were reluctant to leave.<sup>29</sup>

The extent of our everyday habituation is illustrated by Stratton's inverted goggles<sup>30</sup> and Sandlin's backwards bicycle.<sup>31</sup> Stratton created a mirror-prismatic set of goggles that inverted the vision of the wearer. Sandlin created a system of opposing gears that inverted the function of the steering wheel of the common bicycle. In both cases it took many days for the users to habituate. Eventually they were able to function again with transparency, only to find de-habituation again when presented with normal vision<sup>32</sup> or a standard bicycle.<sup>33</sup> The ability to habituate is of a lesser interest to phenomenology than the user experience when confronted with immediate de-habituation. Cyclists, when riding the backwards bicycle, became acutely aware and distracted by the sounds around them.<sup>34</sup> Inverted goggle subjects, on restoring their normal sight, commented on heightened sensations and a raised awareness of everything around them.<sup>35</sup> In an unready-at-hand state of de-habituation (also referred to as active coping<sup>36</sup>) we become acutely aware of our experience.

The accounts presented above have presented thick descriptions and reflections on the lived experiences of this phenomenological inquiry, built around some of the theories of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger. Throughout the thick descriptions



above, attention and awareness of perceptual phenomena were presented, elucidating a curious world of new experiences orbited by affective states. Challenging creative acts were being carried by a body in a state of fear, confusion and physiological duress imposed by the phenomenological field. While the intention of the account was to focus on the creative act, the narrative regularly drifts in and out of descriptions of dangers, frustrations, hopelessness, and longing, as well as sensations of security, tenderness, and love.

Why do the feelings that emerge in active coping in one phenomenological field re-emerge in Shared Reality? What of the connection between these feelings and the creative act? The coupling goes awry in the absence of the phenomenological field: some feelings evaporating, some intensifying. The structure of this creative experience and its anomalies sound distantly similar to its antithesis: the destructive experience in active coping. Shared Reality, perhaps being the creative cousin of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is an experiential phenomenon that also fits into this phenomenological framework.

In creative coping, experience was acutely 'felt' by the body, not just observed with the sense organs. These feelings of being, connected with lived active coping, become exaggerated and heightened. Shared Reality then takes the common sphere of reflection shared by the one individual. It revisits the postures, actions and intentions shared by the one individual at different times in the same creative field. I feel that Merleau-Ponty's

account of falling to sleep comes close to this feeling:

I lie down in bed, on my left side, with my knees drawn up; I close my eyes and breathe slowly, putting my plans out of my mind. But the power of my will or consciousness stops there. As the faithful, in the Dionysian mysteries, invoke the god by miming scenes from his life, I call up the Visitation of sleep by imitating the breathing and posture of the sleeper. The god is actually there when the faithful can no longer distinguish themselves from the part they are playing, when their body and their consciousness cease to bring in, as an obstacle, their particular opacity, and when they are totally fused in the myth. There is a moment when sleep 'comes'...<sup>37</sup>

In the appropriate phenomenological field, in the posture of the sleeper, sleep comes. Not a wilful, conscious choice to sleep, but the outcome of the body in a specific posture, in a specific field, acting in a specific way. Such was the experience of affect in the Shared Reality: a perspective supported by Downing's theoretical stance regarding the body in emotion theory.<sup>38</sup>

The way we experience phenomena depends upon the field within which it is situated.<sup>39</sup> Phenomenological fields modulate all dimensions of experience. Experience exists relative to a field: how it is situated within a field will influence and change the experience of the phenomenon.<sup>40</sup>



This was also articulated by Bachelard, quoting Dioule:

'By changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating. ... For we do not change place, we change our nature.'<sup>41</sup>

We reach a state of communication and openness to our nature. In the richness of lived experience, everything is presented together as a melded symphony of stimulus, but all remains modulated by the phenomenological field.

### **conclusion**

The phenomenological inquiry has explored the theories of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger via lived experience of a creative process in extreme environments of the Arctic winter and Shared Reality. The thick description accounts of the lived experience in the Arctic and then of the re-lived experience in the Shared Reality support Merleau-Ponty's position that a particular posture of the body in a particular context (e.g. such as a going to sleep posture or a posture of an artist in Shared Reality) may give rise to a state of mind or an affect (e.g. sleep or sadness respectively), rather than it always being the other way round (i.e. that a state of mind or an affect causes our body to assume a particular posture). My main conclusion, however, is that the Shared Reality, which comprises a unique blend of virtual reality representing a lived experience and the present reality,

must be studied further, as it offers unique perspectives on habituation, coupling, affect and the creative process, among other things. This work is still in progress, and future investigation will look at new perspectives. I wish to turn some attention to the creative role of the phenomenological field itself. In addition, I wish to invert the process of this inquiry: to creatively cope first, in a not-experienced un-shared sphere of reality, and then document the outcomes when the spheres are merged and reality becomes shared again. Future inquiry may probe the experience of space and time in Shared Reality, which can be achieved in part using recently developed technology: untethered VR that will allow Shared Reality to be carried out in any phenomenological field. There is also a possibility for Shared Reality to be studied as a simulation of PTSD in order to find a way to treat or alleviate the symptoms of PTSD.



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