

APPROACHING THE UNKNOWN IN *IGNORAMUS ANONYMOUS*

Recently I read an article about Google's largely secret 'personalisation algorithms', which are used to filter its search results.¹ In theory, these work to provide users with the most relevant information. In practice, they generate a pervasive and opaque system of information bias, based on (potentially problematic) assumptions about what we want to know. While the effect of these algorithms is sometimes impossible to overlook, I had never really considered until then just how extensively Google and its equivalents might be arbitrating our knowledge formation: the 'unknown unknowns' that are the corollary of every foray into the encyclopedic ether of the internet.



Malcolm Whittaker's project *Ignoramus Anonymous* invites participants to 'revel in that which we do not know, and that which we do not know that we do not know'.² The work takes the form of a support group for the ignorant, playfully appropriating the codes and conventions of group therapy. With the most minimal of staging – a circle of chairs in an intimate room – Whittaker marks out a space for this performative exchange, in which he plays the role of unassuming moderator. Naturally, there is no set agenda; rather, the work provides an open forum for discussing any topic about which participants feel ill informed, with an attendant sense of puzzlement, frustration or guilt. 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. It's all grist to the mill of Whittaker's proposition that in our age of 'hysterical technological immediacy' it is easy to construct a thin veneer of knowledge on a vast number of topics, yet the increasing atomisation of our social relations means that we now know less about far more. The extent of our unknown unknowns is truly unfathomable.



Perhaps there is no better context for a work that probes the concept of ignorance in the age of the internet than the oldest library in Australia. Every month for the last year or so, the State Library of New South Wales has hosted a session of *Ignoramus Anonymous* in its regal Shakespeare Room.³ The sheer volume and historical significance of the Library's collections metaphorically bear down on visitors as they cross its neoclassical threshold and enter the spectacular main chamber of the Mitchell wing, with its vaulted ceiling and dark-stained shelving pressed against the periphery. On Whittaker's part, the juxtaposition of artwork and site is ironic and gently provocative. The Library is a self-proclaimed 'knowledge landmark', an emblem of institutionally sanctioned information and an antidote for ignorance.⁴ Against this backdrop, Whittaker invites participants to embrace a 'lack' that is routinely suppressed in everyday life, underscoring the library's purpose while flouting its resources. But the context also raises the spectre of what he terms 'the cultural status of different forms of knowledge'. As the dialogue in each session progresses, typically these forms rub up against one another and reveal engrained hierarchies of value: the read above the heard, the broadcast above the blogged, the seen above the felt, and so on. Such predispositions are cast into relief by the discursive nature of the event, which gives absolute primacy to that most capricious of communication channels, the spoken word.



Like all of Whittaker's works, *Ignoramus Anonymous* privileges a live encounter between artist and audience. Process and execution overlap. The act of making is distributed among numerous agents and 'the work' takes on a fragmented, durational character, dispersing into the world at the end of the meetings. At the beginning of each gathering, Whittaker delivers a monologue couched within the ritual of a meditation exercise, which deftly focuses the group's attention. The script veers wildly across temporalities and subjects – from the intensely personal to the ethical, evolutionary and macro political – interweaving confessional and inquisitive modes of address. It sets a generous, reassuring tone and is inflected with moments of apparent vulnerability, though it is impossible to discern the 'authenticity' of his personal

revelations in the narrative. This ambiguity is both critical and compelling. In a sense, the monologue operates as an allegory for the work at large, self-consciously representing its entanglement of play and serious enquiry, the fictionalised and 'real', reflective and speculative speaking positions. Whittaker's hand in the remainder of the sessions is unobtrusive; coaxing more stirring conversation is not the agenda of his support group. The work's strength is to be found elsewhere, beyond the generally convivial banter that forms its first layer, in the sincere self-reflexivity it prompts both during and after the fact. 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.



The intersection of pedagogy and performance in recent contemporary art has been a widely discussed tendency. From lecture performances to workshops, activated archives to temporary schools, artists have sought to disrupt existing knowledge economies by generating alternative sites for information exchange. Locally, there are numerous examples of such initiatives, many by Whittaker's generational peers.⁵ *Ignoramus Anonymous* shares with these an interest in generating improvised and responsive spaces of engagement, and in articulating knowledge as a form of social capital. But it also provides a distinctive counterpoint. Here, the contemplation of ignorance 'as a cultural phenomenon' is privileged over teaching and learning, though these may be incidental effects⁶. 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. And finally, 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.⁷ Materially, the work is as nimble as they come; conceptually it is rich and thought provoking, cloaking philosophical depth behind an irreverent façade.

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1. Wendy Zuckerman, 'Unknown unknowns', *The Saturday Paper*, June 7-13, 2014, p28
2. Malcolm Whittaker, 'An Introduction to Ignoramus Anonymous', *Little Book of Ignorance*, self-published, Sydney, 2013, p10-11. All quotes by the artist are taken from this text, unless otherwise noted.
3. The work has also been staged at the Waverly Library, Sydney; the Festival of Live Art, Arts House, Melbourne; Launceston Library and Sawtooth ARI as part of Junction Arts Festival, Launceston; and the Museum of Contemporary Art, Sydney.
4. As described on its website, 'About the library / World-leading library', accessed 8 June 2014: <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/about/organisation/index.html>
5. A cursory sample from recent years: Lara Thoms, *The Experts Project* (2010-12); Kelly Doley, *The Learning Centre* (in several iterations, 2010-12); Ian Milliss and Lucas Ihlein, *Yeomans Project* (2011-2013); Tessa Zettel and Karl Khoe, *The Delerious Bakery* (2011); and *(Wo)man with Mirror*, by Teaching and Learning Cinema (2009-ongoing).
6. Whittaker, correspondence with the author, 7 May 2014
7. See Irit Rogoff, 'Turning', *e-flux Journal*, #0 November 2008, which also provides a broader perspective on the recent intersection of pedagogy and art. Accessed 11 June 2014. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/turning/>