

# An Inflationary Act: sculptural process, materiality, performance and site

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Exegesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy, Fine Arts.

This research was supported by an Australian Government Research training  
Program Scholarship (RTP).

December 2019

#### STATEMENT OF ORIGINALITY

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## Acknowledgments

Firstly,

I acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the land on which this research was undertaken, and recognise their continuing connection to land, water and community. I pay respect to Elders past, present and emerging.

The cliché reads that ‘to raise a child it takes a village’, and this is certainly true for the raising of a PhD. Therefore, I would like to thank ‘my village’.

Thank you to my family:

My dad, Bob Snape, for a lifetime of unwavering support and encouragement of any of my endeavours. My Mum, Elin O’Connell, who first fostered my aspirations of artistic and academic pursuit and whose straight talking and critical analysis I miss. My wonderful and bright and talented children, Bella and Blake who are my joy and inspiration, and especially my beautiful, loyal and ever supportive wife, ShellB.

A very special thank you to my principal supervisor Dr Faye Neilson for stoically believing in me and my work. Without Faye’s absolute commitment and support I am certain I would never have made it to this point. Thank you to Nola Farman, my co-supervisor for her long and enduring patience and I cannot neglect to mention the late Dr Angela Philp whose generous knowledge, encouragement and will set me on this path. Angela, you are missed.

Thank you to all my friends and colleagues who have supported me along the way, not to mention all the artists and makers at The Creator Incubator. Particularly, I would like to mention technical officer in sculpture and friend, Michael Garth whose encouragement to ‘give this inflation thing a crack’ rocketed my research and my practice on a new and exciting trajectory. Thank you to my good friend Ron Royes for his loyal assistance (and philosophical musings), Maurice (Moz) Waters for his collaborative support and to my great old friend and collaborator Dean Beletich.

Thank you to all the team at The Lockup, especially Jessi England, Courtney Novak and Dale Collier for not only providing the opportunity to hold such an important exhibition in their space but allowing me to do it a second time for the examiners.

My great ‘old mates’: Gary Telford for his enduring moral support and engineering advice; Anthony Paterson, again for moral and painting support; and David Sullivan for many years of stoic support and the weekly ‘check-in’ phone call to ensure I was ok and on task.

Finally, while writing this our family had to say goodbye to our loyal (furry) best friend and member of the family Lou Lou who was always there to oversee the children grow into adults and excitedly greet me on my return home every day.

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## Abstract

This practice-based research has sought to develop and interrogate an individuated process of creating cold inflated steel sculpture. Through the course of the study, unique outcomes have been revealed through identifying the performative potential of this process and by positioning my practice within the art historical contexts of both sculpture and performance – or as ‘action sculpture’. The extended parameters of my practice allow the work to exist spatially, as a real time performance or as a mediated event. Here, process drives the development of unique sculptural works that are self-contained, phenomenological and responsive to site.

The research consists of an extensive and original creative component, which is supported and consolidated with a written exegesis. The exegesis is an inter-relational reflection of my practice-based approach, firmly establishing my practice within contemporary discourse. As a companion to the creative outcomes, the exegesis serves to contextualise my practice in relation to the work of other artists, art history and specific sites of engagement.



# Introduction

This exegesis supports and consolidates an inter-relational combination of practice-based and practice-led<sup>1</sup> research and serves as companion to the extensive creative component of the research.

The differentiation between practice-based and practice-led methodologies can be unclear. Linda Candy clarifies the differences quite succinctly:

If the research process is primarily based on the making of an artefact, the research could be said to be practice *based*. If the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice, it is practice *led*.<sup>2</sup>

By this definition my research, as exemplified in this exegesis, will demonstrate that the breadth of this investigation is a combination and interrelation of these two methodologies. My approach is specifically located in practice, in the development of a unique sculptural process of cold steel inflation and its application to performance-based outcomes, as 'real time' events, mediated filmic outcomes and site-specific installation. This exegesis will show how my approach contributes new knowledge to the fields of contemporary sculpture, installation, performance, video performance and public art making. It describes the evolution of my process and contextualises my practice within the broader art historical discourse, particularly in terms of contemporary three-dimensional art practice.

A primary motivator for this current research is that throughout the history of art, particularly before the 1960s, much of the analysis of

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<sup>1</sup> L. Candy, E.A. Edmonds, and R. Ascott, *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner* (Libri Pub., 2011), pp. 33-59.

<sup>2</sup> Candy, Edmonds, and Ascott, *Interacting: Art, Research and the Creative Practitioner*, P 36.

art/artworks focused on the two-dimensional image, often neglecting analysis of the conditions unique to the making and/or experiencing of sculpture or three-dimensional materiality. In addition, much of the earlier analytical literature does not appear to specifically engage with the physical and psychological content brought to the work by the viewer, or perhaps more aptly, the participator.

Formalist art theory of the twentieth century, championed by individuals such as Roger Fry and Clement Greenberg, centred on the premise that an artwork should be engaged with or encountered as an autonomous entity, to be free of prescribed content, to be enjoyed for its specific formal qualities. Greenberg contended that the subject of art was art itself<sup>3</sup>. However, to experience the work *only* on these terms would require the work to be experienced in some kind of cognitive vacuum. How could any relatively intelligent and conscious being ignore or block out all of the visual, psychological and social history they have accumulated throughout their life's journey to then experience an artwork as an innocent, free of association? A formalist approach is but one aspect from which to experience and understand works.

Sculptors, particularly in the latter half of the twentieth century, adopted the Modern Formalist approach as it provided a license to explore form and material as the valid content of the work. This state of affairs provided conditions for the burgeoning of abstraction in painting and sculpture, however, no matter how abstracted and divorced from mimesis or representation, further representational content was always inherent, much to the chagrin of stoic Formalists. As Erwin Panofsky stated in *Meaning in the Visual Arts*, "In a work of art, form cannot be divorced from content".<sup>4</sup>

Panofsky's iconography and iconology is predicated on a linear and logical process of analysing artworks and is a handy tool to gain an understanding of some of the artwork's content. However, iconography

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<sup>3</sup> Anne D'Alleva, *Methods & Theories of Art History*, London 2012, p. 18

<sup>4</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), p. 205

and iconology can only help partially in the analysis of works. Iconography explores the signs and symbols inherent in an artwork and of course this approach can be applied when encountering site-specific sculpture. It is also important to note that not all percipients<sup>5</sup> will be aware of or responsive to some or many of the signs contained within an artwork. Important to acknowledge is that the knowledge and experience that one brings to the work will set up an individually unique system of signs and/or symbols in addition to what may be perceived as a commonly understood.

Semiotics, the theory of signs is essentially a development of iconography and was developed by the Swiss Ferdinand de Saussure and the American Charles Sanders Peirce. It opens up the study of signs and symbols to a world of interconnectedness, where one sign generates another. One of Dutch writer Mieke Bal's contributions to semiotics was to introduce the notion that "a radically dynamic view, however, would conceive the sign not as a thing, but as an event."<sup>6</sup> This introduces the viewer (the percipient) to the process of engaging with, interpreting and ultimately becoming an element of, or a participator in, artworks, where the percipient contributes to the meaning or content of the work. This acknowledgement of the psychology of the percipient is central to my research of site-specific artworks, in that formal, social, political and psychological context all contribute to the content of the work.

In a discussion of Martin Heidegger's philosophy, art historian Anne D'Alleva writes that "...when artworks no longer function as cultural paradigms, they can become merely objects of aesthetic contemplation – precious treasures, perhaps, but relegated to the margins of human

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<sup>5</sup> I choose carefully to use the word 'percipient' as the alternatives i.e. *viewer* or *spectator* do not sufficiently encompass all that is involved when experiencing a site-specific, large-scale, three-dimensional, immersive artwork. With my adoption of the word 'percipient' I aim to encompass experience as something perceived through the engagement of all the senses as opposed to just seeing from a disengaged distance.

<sup>6</sup> Mieke Bal, "From Sub to Suprasemiotic: the Sign as Event" in Sunil Manghani, Arthur Piper & Jon Simons (Ed.) *Images: A Reader*, Sage Publications Ltd., London, 2006, p. 119

experience.”<sup>7</sup> For Heidegger, art was about experience, and not about feeling.<sup>8</sup> I concur with this assumption to some extent, but depart at the exclusion of feeling. In her book *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, writer and curator Jill Bennett observes that *Affect*, or emotion, feeling and memory are completely entwined in the process of experiencing and absorbing (and concurrently) contributing to the content of artworks,<sup>9</sup> this thinking closely mirrors my approach to artmaking and its installation.

Memory, imagination and even mood are unavoidable ingredients in the reiterative mix that takes place when one encounters and perceives site-specific sculpture; therefore, it is necessary to explore the phenomenological investigations of philosopher Paul Crowther. Crowther is one of the few scholars who addresses the unique position of sculpture within the discourse. Crowther writes on phenomenological depth:

Phenomenological depth centres on the ontological reciprocity of subject and object of experience. The embodied subject is immersed in a physical world which is not dependent on that subject for its existence and which, indeed, determines the character of the subject (in terms of both its physical constitution and the activities in which it must engage, in order to survive). At the same time, however, the nature of the physical world as perceived is itself given a specific character through the range of cognitive and motor capacities, which the subject brings to bear upon it. The ontological structure of the subject and its objects of experience are thus reciprocally correlated in key respects. At the experiential level, each is, in effect, part of the full definition of the other.<sup>10</sup>

Importantly, Crowther’s notion of the phenomenological depth provides a horizon where everything is on the table, whereby; the *Affective*

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<sup>7</sup> Anne D’Alleva, *Methods & Theories of Art History*, London 2012, p. 120

<sup>8</sup> Anne D’Alleva, p. 120

<sup>9</sup> Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art*, Stanford University Press, 2005

<sup>10</sup> Paul Crowther, *Phenomenology of the Visual Arts (even the frame)*, Stanford University Press, 2009, p. 3

(personal), *Social* (societal) and *Cognitive* (knowledge) all contribute to the meaning/content of artworks.

This document will traverse through my practice-based and practice-led research, chronicle discoveries in the studio, identify the ‘value’ of those discoveries and discuss the application of new knowledge in experimental processes and new works. These processes and outcomes are studied and reported throughout the five chapters of the exegesis.

Chapter 1, *The Act of Inflation*, guides the reader through my initial experimentation with the cold steel inflation method, its development and the shift in my practice that occurred in response to these findings. This chapter outlines the discovery of this method through a practice-based approach, and the subsequent practice-led meaning and content that has emerged from this discovery to drive the research further. The chapter also positions my practice within a broader art historical framework, drawing on theoretical discourse from writers such as Rosalind Krauss, Harold Rosenberg and Barbara Bolt.

The work of contemporary practitioners in the field, including Oscar Zieta and Jeremy Thomas, is also explored in Chapter 1, whilst historical examples of artists working with inflated forms serve to contextualise my conceptual position. Piero Manzoni’s *Artist’s Breath* and Andy Warhol’s *Silver Clouds* are early reference points, followed with examples of work by Anish Kapoor and Richard Serra and those of contemporary artists who adopt mimesis to simulate the inflated form, such as Jeff Koons, Ricky Swallow and Alex Seton.

The notion of *Finding Performance* is flagged in Chapter 1 but shapes the content of Chapter 2. This chapter heralds the emergence of a new performative direction in my research and practice, which occurred in response to studio experimentation and theoretical research. Chapter 2 focuses on the use of performance and its importance in driving the research forward. Beginning with Aaron Stoller’s writing around the

idea that the process is the artwork<sup>11</sup>, this chapter also investigates Richard Serra's 'action sculpture' *Splashing* (1968) in relation to my studio exploration. I draw on Rosalind Krauss's analysis of the 'expanded field',<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Bourriaud's idea that the work of contemporary art is not an end point but a point of departure – as a generator of new ideas – and discussion of the value of documentation to artistic practice. This chapter investigates the documentation of performance and how it was identified and applied through my studio practice.

Chapter 3 announces my first opportunity to present this new research in a major exhibition, to a broad audience at a large public art gallery, Maitland Regional Gallery. Within this chapter, I demonstrate the breadth of my process-driven research practice in the studio and the theoretical consolidation of that practice, drawing from phenomenologists including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger and Paul Crowther. Artists who have not only informed my practice but the development of sculpture to this point are also investigated in this chapter. From the minimal forms of Constantin Brancusi; the soft sculpture of Claes Oldenburg; the interactive, spatial explorations and reflective surfaces of Anish Kapoor, to Matias Faldbakken's interrogation of materiality as evident in his compressed bundles of steel lockers.

Through themes and the methodologies of *Reflective surfaces*, *Restraint*, the *Anthropomorphic Inflation*, *Safety Apparatuses*, *Inflatable Toys and Context*, *Plugging In* and *Self-forming*, I guide the reader through the intertwined duality of the formulation of process and concept throughout the research, and through the development and realization of the body of work presented in *Materiality Performed* at Maitland Regional Art Gallery.

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<sup>11</sup> Aaron Stoller, "Time and the Creative Act," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society: A Quarterly Journal in American Philosophy* 52, no. 1 (2016): pp. 47-61.

<sup>12</sup> Rosalind Krauss, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field," 8, no. October (1979)

In Chapter 4 the concepts of materiality, the duality of pressure and release, and restraint, that are clearly inherent in the inflated steel process, are fully interrogated in reference to the exhibition, *Internal Pressure* at The Lock-Up. Chapter 4 establishes the significance of site, specifically the internal or inside site. In particular, the prominent contextual conditions of the nineteenth century police lock-up, turned contemporary art space, *The Lock-Up*, will be discussed in direct connection to the development of the works for the exhibition, *Internal Pressure*. Through the chapter, I will communicate the implicit content gleaned from the cold steel inflation process that feeds into the contextualization of the installed works in the *Internal Pressure* exhibition. This chapter will also demonstrate the results of ‘finding performance’ through the practice-led studio research when interrogating the inflated steel method.

Finally, in Chapter 5, I will discuss the reception of artworks and the specific conditions of the external or outside site. When discussing the response to the artworks featured in this chapter, the influential spatial, environmental, social and psychological factors will be acknowledged.

Beginning with *Nothin’ but Sky* sited in Mark’s Park, Bondi, NSW, Australia, which came at the very beginning of this research, I will thoroughly chronicle the development of the work through conception, development, realization and the final siting of the work. Artists working in a similar vein, such as Nancy Holt, James Turrell and Anish Kapoor, will also be discussed. This work is placed in relation to the Modernist tradition, in specific reference to Ron Robertson Swann’s *Vault* (Fig. 33). Throughout the chapter, and drawing from the writing of Paul Crowther, I explain the phenomenological experience of *Nothin’ but Sky* (Fig. 55) and *Clouds Gathering* (Fig. 59) and how that experience changes as one moves around and through the works.

In the second part of the chapter focus is comprehensively set on the conception, development and realization of *Clouds Gathering*, sited at Maitland Riverlink Building, Maitland, NSW, Australia. *Clouds Gathering* was commissioned by Maitland City Council and as the chapter will attest, provided a timely opportunity to test my newly developed cold steel inflation methods on a grand site-specific scale.

The exegesis concludes with my reflections on the significance and value of my practice-led research and its contribution to new knowledge in the fields of sculpture, installation, mediated performance and site specificity.