The Shape of Nonknowledge

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Abstract

Research Paper

This research paper explores the possibilities of relating to something, an unknown thing, not through the ordinary acts of knowing, but by developing some alternative perspectives and more curious strategies. The paper proposes that there may be various gentle and generous tactics of approaching the unknown that embrace a relationship which is more ambiguous, ephemeral and imperfect. Art is one of those rare fields wherein establishing this type of unconventional relationship comprising uncertainties and not-knowing can prove a generative, motivating and fruitful resource. Moreover, as Bataille suggested, it has the capacity to reorient the limits of rational knowledge - that depends on logic and precision - towards the idea of play and the absurd. In an attempt to investigate this rather compelling area, this paper brings together research into three key aspects; i.e., impermanence, incompleteness and contradiction, which will be used as conceptual tools to subvert traditional knowledge systems’ intended authority and study nonknowledge within the realm of potentiality.

Creative Work

The studio work that I will present for examination is a large-scale installation featuring numerous different sculptures constructed using a variety of materials including cardboard, plaster, grout and fabric, along with various found objects and scraps of trash. Although the installation will contain disparate objects with contrasting material and conceptual qualities, the whole installation will function as a single uniform environment, with passages from work to work. Suggesting this ambivalent landscape as one of the mysterious storages of the mind with full of potential, productivity and ecstasy, nonknowledge will assume the form of a clumsy and messy hodgepodge of as-yet-unknowns arranged in a chaotic yet personal order.
Introduction

“On a grassroots level we say that man can touch more than he can grasp.”

Gabriel Marcel

One of the central preoccupations of my MFA project has been the idea of not-knowing. The term not-knowing, which is loaded with negative connotations, was initially used to describe a state equal to incompetency. However, recent studies of not-knowing have put considerable effort into acknowledging not knowing as a fertile state open to fresh new possibilities. Given its liberation from the pre-made assumptions and systematic habits of thinking, not-knowing may offer a unique opportunity to discover the unknown with greater sensitivity. Having recognised my own restrictive thinking habits, in the course of this research, my main motive has been to find a gentle way to relate to an unknown thing through a series of sensitive acts embracing uncertainty, ambiguity, doubt and play.

In the first year of my study, my studio practice was centred on the discovery and the examination of imaginary hybrid creatures. My creative work, which depicted a land invaded by numerous strange beings, has attempted to conquer the knowledge of these creatures through adopting systematic and scientific approaches such as taxonomy, taxidermy and microscopic observation. However, in my second year, I realized that my attempts to obtain knowledge of the unknown were following a strict, restrictive and unilateral, so to say, a violent strategy. Responding to this realization, I shifted my perspective from generating a conquered knowledge of unknowns to generating an unconquered knowledge of unknowns; i.e., nonknowledge.

In my opinion, nonknowledge, the state of not knowing with the basic awareness of the unknowns but still obscure in nature, offers a fruitful space (‘ecstatic’ in Bataille’s terms) wherein this gentle and generous relationship with the unknown is possible. Free from the
constraints of the rational and systematic intellect, nonknowledge allows a nonsensical - sometimes even stupid but rewarding - play with the objects of not knowing.

Arguably, conducting artistic research into the obscure field of the nonknowledge of unknowns is truly challenging if not entirely unreasonable. One major problem is that there are too many unknowns to work on: first, the unknown shape of the unknowns that constitute nonknowledge; and second, the overall unknown shape of nonknowledge composed of unknowns. Accepting this challenge as part of the game, for the purposes of my practice-based research I will alternatively employ an intuitional and experiential approach on the one hand, while carefully reflecting on the theoretical and comparative component on the other.

In Chapter 1, I will provide some background information about the concept of ‘not-knowing’ and the states of not knowing, with a certain emphasis on ‘nonknowledge’. Contrary to the overwhelmingly negative bias toward alternative knowledge and thought models, I will present nonknowledge as an essential component of knowledge-making, and explore it within the realm of potentiality. French philosopher Georges Bataille and German sociologist Matthias Gross’s ideas on nonknowledge will guide me through my approach to employing nonknowledge as a playful and productive strategy. Next, based on Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard’s statements on the arguable history of knowledge production, I will comment on the concealed violence inherent in the nature of power structures and the status quo, the two forces that are highly decisive in establishing the systems of knowledge. Finally, as being one of the most promising fields in terms of using not-knowing and related concepts (e.g., uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity, ambivalence) as a source of strength and curiosity, I will examine how 21st century sculpture responds to the changes caused by the end of the authoritarian and repressive, certainty-based knowing practices of the modern age.

In Chapter 2, I will briefly mention some formal and conceptual qualities of the sculpture from which I derive my inspiration from, and investigate whether these qualities correspond to the structural and contextual texture of nonknowledge. Concentrating on 21st century sculpture, which has its roots in Arte Povera, Dada, Fluxus and Robert Rauschenberg’s junk assemblages, I will focus on the strategies that contemporary artists employ when
responding to the uncertainty and rapid change that typify this new era. These artists, including Franz West, Phyllida Barlow, Rachel Harrison and Jessica Jackson Hutchins have embraced enigmas, uncertainties, instabilities, contradictions, intuition and free-play, terms closely related to nonknowledge, in their work. Through an analysis of the unique shared formal characteristics of the works of these sculptors, I will (a) examine the different manifestations of not-knowing, and (b) will speculate on the shape of nonknowledge.

In Chapter 3, I will talk about the change that my studio practice has undergone over the past two years, from relating to the unknown by trying to know to trying not to know. I will present my studio practice as a reflective process in which the passion and ambition of discovering and identifying an unknown thing is replaced by the acceptance and admiration of the unknown, and enriched with the liberated delight of not knowing. Drawing upon the insights I obtained from the artists and scholars discussed in the previous chapters, together with my own reflections on my Loser/Conqueror exhibition at SCA, I will further elaborate on the ideas that influenced the development of my creative work in the second half of my study. Finally, demonstrating how my shape of nonknowledge will emerge out of a process of inquiry and free play, I will show some documentations of my works in progress including samples that roughly outline the look of my final installation.

In effect, my practice-led research has sought to focus on the following research questions: How can we establish a gentler and more generous relationship with the unknown? Is it possible to relate to the unknown by not knowing? How can we visually depict not knowing? Is it possible to build knowledge of not knowing? If so, what does it look like?
Chapter 1 – On Not Knowing

“Lady Bracknell: I wish he would arrive at some conclusion. Gwendolen: This suspense is terrible. I hope it will last.”

Oscar Wilde, The Importance of Being Earnest

In the main, Western intellectual culture predominantly tends to see ‘not-knowing’ as a weakness by positioning the term next to the absence of knowledge (generally suggesting ignorance) rather than distinguishing the two.\(^1\) However, recent studies try to establish a more favourable relationship with not-knowing. In their book titled Not Knowing: The Art of Turning Uncertainty into Possibility (2014), Steven D'Souza and Diana Renner argue that “the absence of knowledge in Not Knowing is a “negative space full of potential.”\(^2\) For them, not knowing is a fertile place at the edge between the known and the unknown which can lead us to experience fresh new learning, creativity, joy and wonder. It is not entirely constrained by the existing knowledge; therefore, we can play freely.\(^3\) Similarly, social scientist Ariane Berthoin Antal describes ‘not-knowing’ as a state in which individuals do not have epistemic knowledge, or knowledge obtained through the senses. Yet, it is not necessarily a problem to be corrected. Conversely, engaging with not-knowing is an active state, a fruitful resource for generating newness.\(^4\)

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\(^1\) In recent years, many researchers and social scientists including Smithson (1989), Ravetz (1993), Kerwin (1993) and Gross (2010) have agreed on defining ignorance as not knowing including not knowing about what is not known, whereas in not knowing, one knows about not knowing.


\(^3\) D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 19.

\(^4\) Please see, Ariane Berthoin Antal ”Art-based research for engaging not-knowing in organizations,” (2013). Antal gives examples about bringing artists into different positions in professional organizations, in which they have neither technical knowledge and skills, nor they know about the ‘local dialectics’ of organizations. For this reason, engaging in epistemic and sensory research is the first thing they do when they enter organizations. Their ‘not-knowing’ becomes a resource as it generates new motivations and enables artists to make new inquires. This definition is partly borrowed from http://www.sociologyofignorance.com/ignorance_concepts.html based on this research.
Studies encouraging a positive perspective on ‘not-knowing’ have not emerged instantly. Thought surrounding knowing and not-knowing can be traced back to Socrates’ famous proclamation that “the only true wisdom is in knowing you know nothing”. In effect, however, the development of a systematic study of knowledge began in the 1960s. And since around the 1990s, many researchers, writers, scientists and theorists have endeavoured to distinguish and maintain a clear terminology pertinent to the phenomenon of ‘not-knowing’. Michael Smithson (1989), Brian Wynne (1992), Ann Kerwin (1993) and Jerome R. Ravetz (1993), for example, are among the many scholars who have studied in the domain of the unknown and made a great effort to conceptualize different types of not-knowing. Their efforts towards acknowledging that unknown is not “a lack, an impediment or a limitation” of knowledge triggered a striking change in how we respond to it.  

As a result of the attempts of the sum of these studies on establishing, reinventing or reconfiguring the nomenclature around the various processes of not knowing, numerous new terms and different definitions have been presented by many scholars. However, the terminology used in today’s literature has caused considerable confusion and difficulty in current discussions due to its increasingly overlapping definitions and usages. To prevent this complexity, in this research paper, I will make use of Matthias Gross’s terms and definitions. Gross, one of the most important scholars who critically reviewed the notions and concepts peculiar to the unknown, paid great attention to distinguish and carefully situate “existing usages of knowledge about the unknown”. Moreover, within his other categories, he paid special attention to non-knowledge, a phenomenon I explore in the following section.

Gross identified six core types of knowledge or states of not-knowing: knowledge, ignorance, non-knowledge, negative knowledge, extended knowledge and nescience. (See Table 1, 2007). Although each term has its own specific categorization, Gross admitted that it also “shows that different types of unknowns are embedded within other types of

5 Marija Uzunova, "Unknowns and Ways of Not Knowing." (PhD diss., Maastricht University, 2012).
7 Table 1 is reproduced from Gross, “The Unknown in Process,” 751.
unknowns as well as (potentially) an extension of other types.”

In other words, as well as being dynamically linked to each other, these terms overlap. But this does not allow their meanings to become blurred or disrupt analytical clarity.

Table 1  Gross’s “Categorization of Knowledge, Different Unknowns and Extended Knowledge”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Knowledge</th>
<th>A belief that was justified as true and is accepted by a group or certain individuals studied by a sociologist.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ignorance</td>
<td>Knowledge about the limits of knowledge in a certain area; increases with every state of new knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge about what is not known but taking it into account for future planning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative knowledge</td>
<td>Knowledge about what is not known, but considered as unimportant or even dangerous – can lead to non-knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended knowledge</td>
<td>Based on planning and/or research with non-knowledge – can also lead to new non-knowledge by uncovering limits of the newly gained knowledge.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nescience</td>
<td>Lack of any knowledge: prerequisite for a total surprise beyond any type of anticipation – can lead to ignorance and non-knowledge, but belongs to a different epistemic class from the above terms.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Gross alludes to the subtle semantic variations that distinguish these terms, and aimed to overcome conceptual and terminological difficulties. However, and perhaps more importantly, he invested a certain amount of time in correctly defining non-knowledge, in the process re-translating Georg Simmel’s (1858-1918) notion of Nichtwissen. According to Gross, the term non-knowledge “points to the symmetry between knowledge (Wissen) and its natural flip side (Nichtwissen) to denote that there can be knowledge (Wissen) about what is not known.” For him, Simmel’s usage of Nichtwissen (nonknowledge) “should not generally be understood as ignorance, unawareness, or as the mere absence of knowledge, but rather as a specific kind of knowledge about what is not known. Nichtwissen is present when there is not sufficient knowledge about a certain issue or problem to be solved and when the actors involved are aware of what it is they do not know.”

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9 Gross writes in his article The Unknown in Process that Nichtwissen was translated as “ignorance” in English speaking sociology until 1990s, except for the authors whose native language was German. p.746
11 Gross, “‘Objective Culture,’” 424.
aware that they know what they do not know, these “as yet unknowns” “can be taken into account for future planning.” In this sense, instead of being a direct opposite of knowledge, nonknowledge “captures the dynamic interplay between the known and unknown,” and has come to be seen as a more positive, even productive component of knowledge-making.

According to Gross, “human existence per se is constantly a matter of playfully experimenting with what is known and what is not known,” and nonknowledge, as being outside the accepted sets of knowledge, is a very suitable place for these playful experiments. Within this context, the ideas of well-known philosopher and writer George Bataille and those of Matthias Gross seem to bear an exciting resemblance. For Bataille, everything is a play. Being is a play, the whole universe is a play. Even the idea of God was initially a game. However, human thought, even the most ancient human thought (especially Christian thought) is imbued with heaviness. It has harnessed God to creation and the implications of creation, which are contrary to play. When the heaviness of thought drags humans out of the game and makes them leave the play, knowledge yields. So now, the major game is nonknowledge, which is undefinable and inconceivable by human thought. For this reason, nonknowledge makes we human beings uneasy. However, when we choose to abandon knowledge and liberate ourselves from the enslavement of knowledge, “every time we give up the will to know, we have the possibility of touching the world with a much greater intensity.” “[The] unknown is [always] “richer” than the known.”

Bataille argues that human curiosity regarding knowing is circular. Man knows something and his curiosity encourages him to reduce the part that he does not know. Only if he knows everything, his knowledge does not differ from his nonknowledge. When this circle closes.

13 Uzunova, “Unknowns and Ways of Not Knowing.”
16 Bataille, Nonknowledge, 115.
17 Bataille, Nonknowledge, 159.
within man, his ‘automatic curiosity’ is no longer supported. But, it is not possible to dispose of already accomplished knowledge, so as closing the circle. Facing this absurd situation gives man a feeling of performing in a comedy full of despair. If he continues to exist in a world desperately inaccessible to him with the awareness of his own despair, a new domain opens to consciousness and he begins to feel the ecstasy in not knowing. This ecstasy not only engenders inspiration: it enriches the experience that man is getting from the unknown.\(^\text{18}\)

Bataille also states that in laughter, we experience the same ecstasy as in nonknowledge given that we instantly release our minds from the restrictions of any cognitive structures. He observes: “We would laugh, not for a reason that we would not happen to know, for lack of information, or for want of sufficient penetration, but because the unknown makes us laugh.” When we laugh, we pass from the known (the expected) to the unknown (the unforeseeable).\(^\text{19}\) Nonknowledge makes us laugh and in laughter, “like tears, like art, like poetry, like meditation, like eroticism, like religious ecstasy,” all hierarchies, all distinctions disappear. Thus, laughing is a rebellious act in itself since it defies all the regulations and norms that systems are established to conduct and operate.\(^\text{20}\) In that manner, as long as we are able to play and laugh and loosen the ties of our heavy consciousness, a new ecstatic way to relate to the unknown will blossom. It will intensify our relationship with the world we live in, as well as liberating us from the servility that resides at the base of all knowledge systems, which are inevitably contributing to modern society’s established order. This state is available to us in the unconstrained lightness of nonknowledge.

In the foreword of his very famous book, *The Order of Things* (1970), Michel Foucault asked a very gripping question by shifting his perspective of thinking about the history of nonknowledge. What if it had a system?\(^\text{21}\) In other words, what “if errors (and truths), the practice of old beliefs, including not only genuine discoveries, but also most naïve notions,
obeyed, at a given moment, the laws of a certain code of knowledge?” Foucault found his inspiration in the following passage quoted from a Chinese encyclopedia:

. . . in which it is written that ‘animals are divided into: (a) belonging to Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’. In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking that.

Foucault claimed that the history of knowledge-making was founded on the assumptions based on a society’s historical, cultural, structural and economical rationalization. Thus, the establishment and the development of knowledge systems may have been serving to patrons of power and the status quo, from the Renaissance to the end of the 19th century. His genuine practice of thought has opened up a new perspective on rethinking about the current taxonomies and categorizations, and the circumstances in which they were produced. Jean-Francois Lyotard argues that “knowledge is and will be produced in order to be sold, it is and will be consumed in order to be valorized in a new production: in both cases, the goal is exchange.” In the postindustrial and postmodern age, he continues, “science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its preeminence in the arsenal of productive capacities of the nation-states.” Because science and the development of information technologies are becoming a major stake in economic growth and the expansion of socio-political power, the goal of truth in scientific and technological knowledge is and will never be questioned. He boldly argues “that knowledge and power are simply two sides of the same question: who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? In the computer age, the question of knowledge is now more than ever a question of government.”

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23 Foucault, Order of Things, xvi.
25 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 5.
26 Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition, 7-8.
Social scientist and researcher Helga Nowotny supports this view in her book, *The Cunning of Uncertainty* (2016) in which she states;

Numbers are also linked to power, conveniently in the form of statistics. The uncovering of ‘laws’ and regularities in the social world, and having easy access to information about territorial wealth and the productive value of its inhabitants, conferred additional power on those in a position to use these. The word ‘statistics’ is derived from the Italian *statista*, he who deals with matters of state. From the seventeenth century onwards, statistics have systematically served as the instruments of proof and governance. Beginning with the mercantilistic state of Colbert in seventeenth-century France, each successive state formation denotes a particular structural arrangement between politics, the economy and the purposes and policies of instruments for numbering and enumerating people. Numbers help to govern.  

Similarly, Elizabeth C. Pomeroy and Angela M. Nonaka admit that many scientists working in several different intellectual and professional disciplines, including the social sciences, linguistics, physics, and medicine, often tend to ask questions with already decided answers. They jump to quick conclusions because in highly competitive, information driven societies, “having the correct answer to the question or instant solution to the problem has become synonymous with intelligence and status.” Although “the admission of “not-knowing” the answer to a problem is equated with incompetence”, they suggest, “the stance of not knowing may open the door to the development of new and innovative perspectives, solutions, and discoveries that might otherwise remain buried beneath the status quo of existing knowledge.” Furthermore, they imply that coping with “the fear of being unknowledgeable” and accepting the unknown in our fields of expertise are required to be unshackled from the restraints of compelling theories and customary methods. When this “non-compliance or even rebelliousness sets in, courting the unexpected becomes attractive.”

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30 Pomeroy and Nonaka, “Art of Not Knowing,” 293.
31 Pomeroy and Nonaka, “Art of Not Knowing,” 293.
Steven D’Souza and Diana Renner discuss the potentials and effects of not knowing from the perspective of human nature. For them, “to be human is not to know”. They explain: “We naturally turn to those who promise answers: the experts, the leaders and those who appear to know. We hold on to the knowledge we already have, we are afraid to let it go. We are neurologically hard-wired to avoid the unexpected and prefer certainty. Situations that are ambiguous or uncertain can make us feel incompetent, embarrassed and ashamed.”

They further maintain that neurological studies show that uncertainty may cause as much pain as a physical attack and that even a small amount of it “generates an error response in the brain.” For that reason, we are natural-born answer seekers. This character of our nature causes a paradoxical situation; that is, while this useful attribute of human nature towards solving uncertainty with the existing and handy knowledge - regardless of its applicability - promotes and accelerates the development of our species, it also blocks the way of new learning and growth by limiting our perspective.

The same mechanism has also proven valid for scientists and professionals who are experts in their fields. Their deep knowledge of their particular topic may limit their viewpoint, preventing them from seeking new or adequate information about a certain situation given that they assume that they already know all there is to know. However, the true power of humans against “all-knowing gods” is their capability to have “curiosity, wonder, excitement and possibility.”

In similar vein, due to our brains’ continuous tendency towards fixating on certainty, “we would rather believe in someone else’s false certainty than question it and use our own judgment.” This one basic urge lies behind our relationships with leaders. Our inherent attraction to answers in fact subserves the interests of power structures and provides a safe zone to keep them in charge. Since “keeping the questions rather than settling on the first answer disturbs the equilibrium, is uncomfortable” and constitutes a threat to the status

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33 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 18.
34 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 30.
35 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 31.
36 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 39.
37 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 313.
38 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 52
39 D’Souza and Renner, Not Knowing, 236
quo with its potential to bring change and reconstruction to the established systems, it is generally not encouraged or rewarded. Art is one of the rare domains in which showing response towards the status quo and social order is approved. Moreover, it is regarded as an essential channel via which to express individual or collective concerns which reflects society’s current and often future dynamics. It (partly) allows independent inquiry and is capable of creating some space for experimentation and play. Yet, despite the fact that uncertainty, hesitation, doubt, ambiguity and not knowing are some of the concepts that are mostly welcomed in the arts field, art has struggled with different problems (including its own hierarchies, regulations and dictations along with other dogmatic structures and conventional practices) in different eras of time before reaching to “the age of doubt.”

Polish sociologist Zygmunt Bauman and American art critic Thomas McEvilley claim that modernism was an era of certainty, founded on universal verities with no tolerance towards ambivalence. In Modernity and Ambivalence (1991), Bauman argues that “the typically modern practice, the substance of modern politics, of modern intellect, of modern life, is the effort to exterminate ambivalence: an effort to define precisely – and to suppress or eliminate everything that could not or would not be precisely defined.” He further asserts that all sovereign agencies (governors and scientists in particular) in modern practice were fighting battles already designed, manipulated and engineered for their victory. They were masters of dividing, classifying and allocating, employing strategies including ‘taxonomy, classification, inventory, catalogue and statistics.’ Geometry and the grid system were their ruling tool, and that era was clearly visualized in Mondrian’s work. However, as Bauman argues, the world was much more complicated than geometrical models and grids. The postmodern age was the time of “rediscovering the contingency and ambivalence of being.” Similary, in Sculpture in The Age of Doubt (1999), Thomas McEvilley describes postmodernity as “the end of an age of irrational dogma and communal folly.” Summoned from Adorno’s aesthetic theory, he further suggests that the new art in the new era “has been forced to ‘challenge its own essence’ and to revolt against itself. It does this . . . ‘by

\[40\] Usage borrowed from Thomas McEvilley’s book, Sculpture in The Age of Doubt
\[42\] Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence, 12-15.
\[43\] Bauman, Modernity and Ambivalence, 158.
developing the aesthetics of anti-art.” Referring to McEvilley and his analysis of anti-art, Harriet Zinnes describes exhibitions in contemporary galleries she has viewed as “documentation of the age of Post-Modernism, an age where certainty has been displaced by doubt. Indeterminacy is the norm . . . No longer is there unity but pastiche, not wholeness but randomness, not continuity but disjunction and deconstruction. Instead of paintings there is the art of installation. Instead of the figure there are bones. Instead of perspective there is void.

In Massimiliano Gioni’s essay Ask the Dust (2007), published as part of the catalogue of the exhibition Unmonumental: the Object in the 21st Century, he writes that the first years of the twenty-first century “[define themselves] by the disappearance of monuments and the erasure of symbols - a headless century.” Created without the restraints of traditional artistic forms and materials, the sculptures produced by this new century are “of fragments, a debased, precarious, trembling form that we have called unmonumental.”

As Henri Lefebvre suggested in The Urban Revolution (1970), the monument “is the seat of an institution (the church, the state, the university). Any space that is organized around the monument is colonized and oppressed. The great monuments have been raised to glorify conquerors and the powerful.” Furthermore, monuments are inherently violent because they are the symbols of societal transitions, either jubilation surrounding a victory or a memorial to a defeat, a consequence of a violent battle or conquest. Thus, the new era that these sculptures symbolize marks the end of a repressive order established and regulated by absolute authorities, and proclaims a cultural transformation towards “an almost schizophrenic division between the desire to dissolve into the world and the need to

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45 McEvilley, Doubt, 30.
48 Gioni, Ask the Dust, 65.
fortify their own borders. In this indecision, the sculptures of today might resemble the state of paranoia that we live in as we stand divided between carrying out a new war to conquer new territory or, instead, retreating and carefully protecting our own ground.51 The artists’ struggle regarding the designation of their own borders is, however, both harmless and non-aggressive. In fact, they are mostly interested in defining their own individual or group dilemmas, enigmas, uncertainties and anxieties, all of which they are experiencing in a rapidly changing world full of “urban conflicts and Neo-tribal wars”.52 Instead of being arrogantly demanding and barbaric, most importantly, they are making fun of their own rage.

In the text of Sculpture: Not-Not-Not (or, Pretty Air) (2006), Johanna Burton suggests the interesting notion of a “collapsed field”. Referring to the idea of an expanded field presented by Rosalind Krauss in 1978, Burton asks: “How long can an expanded field remain expansive before its increasingly taut contours tear, or more likely, lose elasticity-devolving into uncontoured flab? ... What does it look like when the field can no longer expand and so collapses?”53 Starting with the Krauss’s definition of the sculpture in her own time, “as the combination of not-landscape and not-architecture”, she asks what the not of “not-not” is and what if it reflects our very own time?

My rehearsal of Krauss’s (now historical) line of reasoning is meant to give a kind of retrospective view of what was then looming and what has perhaps now arrived, the "collapsed field," perhaps less a "crisis" than a state of being. ... indeed, the promise of crisis is that of the clean slate, a critical break with the past, a chance to begin again. ... [it] arrives gently, in an inverted fashion. That is to say, within the collapsed field, rupture might no longer be the sign of crisis we've come to expect (and even fetishize). Rather, a calmly upheld apathy, a general comfort, and kind of bland satisfaction might be today's signal that the field isn't just threatening to collapse, but that it already has.54

I believe that Burton’s idea of “collapsed field” has similar characteristics to Bataille’s notion of nonknowledge. To me, nonknowledge is a collapsed field without any restrictive

51 Gioni, Ask the Dust, 65.
52 Gioni, Ask the Dust, 66.
54 Burton, Not-Not-Not, 13.
boundary. It is neither a crisis, nor a lack. Rather, it is a clean state of being rewarded with “delirium; ecstasy; poetic, sexual, sacred effusions; the absence of consciousness; the debauchery of thought; the death of thought.” Its messiness is its true purity, in which genuine human nature can freely and calmly puzzle around.

Our time is not totally liberated from the repression of dogmatic beliefs and institutional or individual power combats. The tendency of not tolerating uncertainty, doubt or not knowing in various conventional knowledge areas causes many scholars, academics, organizational professionals or governors to make quick, false, assumed or already decided categorizations and systematizations. However, I believe, as Sarah Tutton and Charlotte Day pointed out in the catalogue of Before and after Science: 2010 Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art (2010), “developing a sensitivity to other ways of knowing through the art experience” is a valuable potential that art carries. Embracing uncertainty, doubt, ambiguity, controversy, intuition, irrationality and absurdity of nonknowledge against certainty, analogy, intellect, sense and meaning of knowledge will widen our perspective on alternative ways of knowing. To me, an artwork, sculpture in particular, in and from nonknowledge, inherently shelters these qualities along with some specific others, aspects of which I will discuss in detail in my second chapter.

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55 Kendall, Nonknowledge, xxxix.
“So we have a difficulty. What shall we call the New Thing, which I haven’t encountered yet but which is bound to be out there somewhere? Post-Postmodernism sounds, to me, a little lumpy. I’ve been toying with the Revolution of the Word, II, or the New Revolution of the Word, but I’m afraid the Jolas estate may hold a copyright. It should have the word new in it somewhere. The New Newness? Or maybe the Post-New? It’s a problem. I await your comments and suggestions. If we’re going to slap a saddle on this rough beast, we’ve got to get moving.

Yours,
Alphonse”

Donald Barthelme, Not-Knowing

As a reaction to the dogmatic and repressive practices of the modern era, the 1960s started as a challenge to the prevailing modernist norms in culture as well as to the conventional approaches in fine arts. In New York, in 1960, New Media – New Forms in Painting and Sculpture exhibition was the first exhibition in which “junk assemblage” was presented.\(^\text{57}\)
The exhibition featured many artists including Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Jasper Johns, Claes Oldenburg and Robert Rauschenberg. In the main, they produced notably experimental works that eluded definition and categorization, and poignantly attacked the status quo of the traditional art scene by employing chance, found objects and imagery of mass media in their work. They applied tactics of the preceding artistic practices and movements such as Cubist collage, Dada, Fluxus and Arte Povera to struggle with the social, cultural and artistic delimitations of their time. Among these artists, Robert Rauschenberg’s radical assemblages constructed out of ephemeral and mundane materials collected from streets, e.g.,

cardboard, fabric, mud, rope and various scraps of trash were a striking attempt to defy the material hierarchy of modernism. (see Figure 1)

Contemporary artists embracing uncertainty, doubt and ambiguity also make use of the technical and conceptual strategies employed by these pioneers. In her article *Unmonumental: Going to Pieces in the 21st Century* (2007), Laura Hoptman observes that drawing its origins from Pablo Picasso’s avant-garde collages, Marcel Duchamp’s ground-breaking ready-mades, Dada and Surrealists’ found objects along with Rauschenberg’s Combines, the juxtaposing of manufactured materials, objects and fragments has re-emerged in twenty-first century sculpture. However, she adds, rather than being compositional blends, pieces in the recent assembled forms retain their identity while still functioning as a single work. 58 Moreover, in recent sculpture, the organization of disparate pieces supersedes chance. Today, revolutionary and provocative visuals are being replaced by coherent and personal narratives. 59 In Hoptman’s opinion, contemporary assemblage is not concerned with the evolution or expansion of the notion of sculpture. Rather, it deals with current life issues in a straightforward and highly organized manner. They are collections or customized selections of artefacts within an infinite number of other choices. Nevertheless, “it is not about a million-piece puzzle that is the contemporary global situation. It is a piece of that puzzle.” 60 I argue that nonknowledge, the knowledge of things that we do not know among the unlimited course of unknowns, may be situated in a framework that adopts similar technical operations with the contemporary sculpture coming from Rauschenberg’s tradition. It can manifest itself as an assemblage composed of various miscellaneous elements, whether in fragments or wholes, and exist as a personally organized (either consciously or unconsciously) systematic unity.

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59 Hoptman, Going to Pieces, 132-133.
60 Hoptman, Going to Pieces, 138.
Massimiliano Gioni (2007) states that contemporary sculpture reminds us of a “wasteland, the ruins one might encounter near a checkpoint or in a home trashed by a hurricane.” (See Figure 2) He suggests it is the rediscovery of Arte Povera. However, this time, artists are not using simple, cheap or “poor” materials because they are (or the society they live in is) poor. In fact, they are using everyday materials because their society “is so dramatically suffocating under the weight of toxic waste that it is now forced to turn garbage into an art form.” Furthermore, the usage of waste-based, non-precious and modest materials over traditionally celebrated permanent ones boldly reveals the fragility and mortality of material life which, in turn, reflects the true nature -and inherent instability- of organic existence as well. Gioni suggests that according to this line of thought, the themes of memory and remembrance are very important conceptually. Because recent sculpture “is closer to the image of a palimpsest, a continuous writing and erasing of fragments, stories, private codes and reminiscences,” the material temporality is used by artists as a tool to convey personal histories, memories, stories or ideas vulnerable to being lost in time. In this context, I argue that like memory and remembrance, knowledge is another unsteady function of the human mind. One can learn, forget, add more information to or extract some information from an already existing knowledge, and nonknowledge. Thus, the shape

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61 Gioni, Ask the Dust, 68.
63 Gioni, Ask the Dust, 72.
of knowledge (and its interdependent counterpart nonknowledge) is/should be open to transformation, mutation, or total disappearance. The most suitable materials to portray this quality would be nondurable, impermanent, low-grade, degradable or transmutable materials. A fragmental structure involving material fragility and vulnerability would successfully signify these qualities of nonknowledge.

Robert Smithson made a beautiful analogy between human mind and earthly landscape to expose their common capacity to change and petrify. In his inspiring essay, *A Sedimentation of the Mind: Earth Projects* (1968), he claims that the “brain itself resembles an eroded rock from which ideas and ideals leak.”\(^6^4\) He explains the movements and transformations within the fragmented parallels of the brain and the surrounding environment in the following way;

> one’s mind and earth are in a constant state of erosion, mental rivers wear away abstract banks, brain waves undermine cliffs of thought, ideas decompose into stones of unknowing, and conceptual crystallizations break apart into deposits of gritty reason. Vast moving faculties occur in this geological miasma, and they move in the most physical way. This movement seems motionless, yet it crushes the landscape of logic under glacial reveries. This slow flowage makes one conscious of the turbidity of thinking. Slump, debris slides, avalanches all take place within the cracking limits of the brain. The entire body is pulled into the cerebral sediment, where particles and fragments make themselves known as solid consciousness. A bleached and fractured world surrounds the artist.\(^6^5\)

This continual flux of earth and human mind causes a *mess of corrosion* composed of solid materials as well as piles of rubbles and shapeless wreckages.\(^6^6\) The metaphor of mind as a disrupted landscape together with Johanna Burton’s notion of a “collapsed field”, which I have already illustrated in my first chapter, perfectly reflects the scenery that can be used when modelling nonknowledge. In Burton’s view, a collapsed field might be an *installation*, charged with the hybrid heritage of “Dada, Fluxus, Happenings, constructivism, performance, site-specificity, earthwork, institutional critique, and video, among others”.

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\(^{65}\) Smithson, Sedimentation of the Mind, 149-150.

\(^{66}\) Smithson, Sedimentation of the Mind, 150.
and ready to absorb everything through its pervious and unrestrictive boundaries, like a dynamic and messy landscape without any horizon or limit. The idea of a greedy installation reflecting nonknowledge as a transforming, dynamic and messy landscape composed of *stones of unknown, cliffs of thought and deposits of reason* cultivates my work.

The sculptural pieces featured in *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture* exhibition in 2006 at The Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden in Washington have highly influenced my artistic practice throughout my MFA study. Curator Anne Ellegood describes the experience of the exhibition as drifting in the gallery/landscape amongst the “organized chaos” of autonomous sculptures with contradictory features such as deliberation and spontaneity, elegance and messiness, individual presence and inextricable connection. She further elaborates on the contradictions that contribute to the works’ intensive complexity, placing them “on the verge of entropic collapse or jubilant transformation” while at the same time providing potential for “growth and possibility”.

The in-betweenness of this work extends even beyond being between an object and idea - it is between abstraction and representation and between assemblage and the readymade. The work on view here is at once self-supporting and interdependent, whole and multifaceted, handmade and mass-produced, original and vernacular, serious and humorous, complete and incomplete-embodying the knowable and the utterly confounding. Incredibly, these sculptures contain all of these things.

Additionally, she says that the artists featured in the exhibition are not afraid of confronting the unknown or ambiguous. Rather than giving conclusive answers or presenting resolved imagery, they use this engagement as an opportunity to pose questions, suggest multiple meanings and create open-ended artworks. An awareness of the incompleteness of knowledge occupies an important place in their work; and, they productively make use of it.

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69 Ellegood, Uncertainty of Objects, 29.
70 Ellegood, Uncertainty of Objects, 29.
71 Ellegood, Uncertainty of Objects, 25.
Along with the two artists participated in *The Uncertainty of Objects and Ideas: Recent Sculpture* exhibition, Franz West and Rachel Harrison, work of Phyllida Barlow and Jessica Jackson Hutchins have made a great impact on the evolution of my studio practice. Their disparate yet shared material and conceptual approaches have provided me with a base upon which to build my own perspective on the shape of nonknowledge. The characteristics that I have been tracing throughout this chapter are highly evident in their work.

Furthermore, together with Robert Smithson and Johanna Burton’s insightful approaches, the qualities that I will develop through further investigation of these artists’ works will guide me along the way of discovering and visualizing the landscape of nonknowledge. In brief, these qualities include impermanence (flux, transformation, fragility/vulnerability), incompleteness and open-endedness (fragmentary/eclectic, imperfect/lacking pretension, enigmatic/ ambivalent), and contradictions and dualities (organic/inorganic, soft/hard, heavy/light, finished/raw); which will unfold throughout the rest of this chapter.

If, as Smithson argues, the brain resembles a disrupted rock formation comprising stones of unknowing, or if, as Dario Gamboni claims, the knowledge of an unknown is an “amorphous mass” like any object of knowledge, then Austrian sculptor Franz West is the master of visualizing this eccentric bulk. His paint-splashed amorphous papier-mâché lumps are artificial but strangely organic, serious but innately funny, messy but solid. The biomorphic suggestions of his precisely abstract sculptures attribute those forms a strange familiar quality. For example, in *Parrhesia (Freedom of Speech)* (Figure 3), seven separate sculptures seem to hide seven single individual heads under their covers, or hard shells. Considering its title, the work makes a reference to a meeting in which speaking freely is essential. However, telling long stories is not what West is after. His interest is pure artistic forms and the promotion of the inherent complexity that they carry. And, quite often he prefers to be “nonsensical” rather than offer any meaning.73

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Another important characteristics of West’s work is his discarding of conventional plinths and pedestals by using ordinary objects like metal bins, boxes, crates, palettes and readymades. He usually embeds these objects into his forms spontaneously, and they are mostly free from meaning except for their practical use, evident in his attachment of a tin box in *Sisyphos I* (Figure 4). Also, treating surfaces roughly and leaving the forms unfinished are other remarkable features of West’s sculptural practice. The dialogue between hiding and exposing, concealing and revealing, and the fragile psychology behind this process is a central theme in Franz West’s art. His *Untitled* (Figure 5) work clearly manifests this contradiction in its dual being and informs about its condition having a “Fragile” sign on the uncovered top.
West’s forms are highly charged with enigmatic, ambivalent and elusive tones. Yet, his choice of raw and cheap (poor) materials such as papier-mâché, cardboard, steel, household items, empty bottles etc. keeps them in connection with the everyday and makes communication relatively easier. According to Robert Fleck, West’s intention is “to keep the sculpture outside the world of consumer society and the postmodern simulations of industrial perfection.”  

The power of these forms to create familiarity in their complete strangeness is what I have sought for in unknown objects of nonknowledge. I say this because I believe that establishing a connection with the unknown is crucial if one is to show some awareness of it.

Conversely, Rachel Harrison’s assemblage works need commercial products to make fun of the industrial culture to which they belong. She draws our attention to the contrast between the overproduced objects of consumption and the “unformed, label-less matter.”  

Sometimes, just this duality between fabricated unique lumps and million-copied consumer goods constitutes the meaning of her work. (see Figure 6) When haphazardly-made looking amorphous shapes come together with conceptually organised arrangements, the whole

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process turns into a creative approach that she alludes to as “intuition combined with thinking”\(^76\).

In addition, her juxtaposition of disparate objects enables her work to develop various narratives depending on the presentation and display of objects. For example, *Nose* (Figure 7) is a work in which the positioning of a rubber nose gives the angular pile an animistic appearance. And, the boxes beneath refer to a living creature purchased directly from the store and installed at home. In fact, in contrast to Franz West’s innately biomorphic bulbous blobs, most of Harrison’s abstract forms need extra items to invoke the organic. She employs this strategy to create complex and playful contradictions between the living and the inanimate.

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\(^76\) Nayland Blake, “Artists in Conversation: Interview with Rachel Harrison,” *BOMB*, no.105 (Fall 2008).
Another aspect of Harrison’s sculpture is that while some of her combinations easily manifest themselves, some need careful and detailed reading. *Jack Lemmon* (Figure 8) is one of those works that is hard to relate without certain information regarding the United States’ cultural history. For example, the mask on the mannequin kid is the face of “Dick Cheney, 46th Vice President of the United States. The title riffs on lemon as a colour and as slang for something defective (such as Cheney’s foreign policy) as well as referring to the great comic actor, known as ‘Dickhead’ in one of his later roles.”77 Obvious or obscure, all of these combinations are products of Harrison’s enigmatic logic. As she clearly stated in one of her interviews: “I don’t expect anyone to ever know what’s inside my head.”78 Thus, like every chain of thought, her visual narratives are composed of disparate yet complementary objects peculiar to Harrison’s rationale. As the press release of her exhibition, Perth Amboy, in Greene Naftali noted, this “integration/non-integration of disparate aesthetics is a hallmark of Harrison’s work, which always maintains a commitment to inquiry.”79 For me, this arrangement capability of compatible yet disparate objects and ideas of human logic, sometimes in nonsensical and sometimes in sensible order, prevents nonknowledge from being absolutely chaotic.

![Figure 8. Rachel Harrison, Jack Lemmon, 2011, wood, polystyrene, cement, acrylic, spray paint, mannequin, Dick Cheney mask, sweatshirt, sunglasses, glasses, butterfly net and plastic lemon, 170.2 x 228.6 x 83.8 cm. Reproduced from the Southbank Centre, http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/%20whatson/festivals-series/the-human-factor/rachel-harrison# (accessed July 19, 2016).](image)

78 [Blake, Interview with Rachel Harrison.](http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/%20whatson/festivals-series/the-human-factor/rachel-harrison#)  
Jessica Jackson Hutchins explores both the fragility and vulnerability of objects and bodily beings through pushing their corporeal limits. Nesting her fragile and imperfect objects on aged and shattered household items (See Symposion, Figure 9), or placing them on irregular, bumpy surfaces, as in Head (Figure 10), she mediates on the passage of time, as well as being worn away, defective and immortal. Her forms are in a state of decay.

Jerry Saltz argues that her sculptures “occupy time” in “states of becoming.” The transformation they emphasise is mostly shaped by time, as well as chance, accidents and failure caused by unforeseen or unpredictable situations. In Hutchins’s words, her forms “are all about contingency and cause.”

Sometimes, Hutchins brings the elements of fragility and vulnerability with “the murmurings of today’s society” either by leaving her papier-mâché forms uncovered, or by coating her furniture with newspapers or magazine pages. (see Figure 11) While the burden of an excess of information accelerates the feeling of fatigue, it also blurs the clarity of the message. But Jessica Jackson Hutchins does not want to know anyway. Inspired by Emmanuel Levinas’s

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81 Stuart Horodner, “Artists in Conversation: Interview with Jessica Jackson Hutchins,” BOMB, no.112 (Summer 2010).
ideas on the impossible relationship with the Other, for her, “to know is to murder.”

Venus (Figure 12) features a figure of a woman, or an astronaut, sitting on a broken armchair, or a rocket. In fact, the objects might be anything. This open-ended chain of connotations without a certain conclusion is what she wants to promote in favour of not being a murderer. I suggest that the capacity of art to deal with this uncertainty and not knowing is what nonknowledge is founded upon.

Phyllida Barlow’s large-scale sculptural installations are composed of bulbous shapes and messy accumulations and arrangements of all sorts of ordinary materials including cardboard, rubber, fabric, paper, timber, and cement. They are huge constructions oscillating between architectural environments and sculptural objects. (see Figure 13) Their massive scale suggests monumentality. However, the absurdity of using inherently unmonumental materials to construct unbalanced and impermanent monuments is the main twist of her work.

She combines contradictory and discrete elements, and leaves all the seams visible. While the duality of her materials highlights the physicality of her forms, the transparency of joints

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83 Horodner, Interview with Jessica Jackson Hutchins.
gives her work a sense of unfinishedness and instability. In stark contrast with the permanent and rigid basis of monumental sculptures, her fragmentary anti-monumental forms suggest impermanency and openness to change. For example, in *Untitled: Stack* (Figure 14), the three cement bulbs divided by wooden plates look roughly balanced on top of each other. They convey a disturbing feeling of being on the edge of collapse.

![Image of sculpture with text](image)


In fact, collapse is a very important theme in Barlow’s work. Along with her dramatically arranged structures, the lack of either a layer or a skin covering these massive constructions contributes to the look of being vulnerable and inclined to collapse. *Dock* (Figure 15) is an installation in which the state of a possible collapse and of being collapsed are explicitly demonstrated and compared. This emphasis on the ultimate change or flux of materials and beings, and the tendency to collapse of this greedy mess put the viewer in “a state of uncertainty, a limbo.”

As Ben Luke states, “feels appropriate for our uncertain times [] in the post-crash era.”

Barlow competently reflects the tumult of the contemporary world in the downfall of an integrated unity (See *HOARD*, Figure 16). The disorder and clutter of

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various objects mark the work because “a world of rapid construction and exchange [...] cannot be neatly articulated.”  

In this respect, considering its fragmentary, impermanent and unstable nature, the shape of nonknowledge would be a mess containing amorphous forms of unknowns, familiar and unfamiliar objects, trashy items and bits and pieces. I believe that nonknowledge is already in a collapsed state. However, it is a fertile jumble with the flexibility and capability to exchange, reuse, transform and discard. While the individual pieces constituting nonknowledge are limitless in number and highly personal, I suggest that the overall shape of nonknowledge might be a chaotically ordered landscape situated in one of the dark corridors of the mind.

Before finishing this chapter, I would like to acknowledge Ugo Rondinone’s brightly-coloured rock formations resisting gravity, (Figure 17), Derrick Piens’s ambiguous and hybrid constructions of geology (nature), geometry (artificial) and the mind (consciousness) (Figure 18), and Handiwirman Saputra’s idiosyncratic compositions made out of mundane and banal materials (Figure 19). Not only have all of these works greatly impacted on my art practice throughout my MFA study; as well, they have assisted me to create my own forms of not knowing.

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Chapter 3 – My Studio Work: From Trying to Know to Trying Not to Know

“Science is practiced by men in whom the desire to know is dead.”

Georges Bataille, The Unfinished System of Nonknowledge

My studio work has been an exploration of the unknown, and directed primarily by intuition, curiosity and free-play. Although my interest in diverse materials and techniques, and my fondness for unconventional and experimental methods have always been the same, my approach to the unknown has changed remarkably over the last two years. In the first year of my MFA study, I focused on the discovery and curious investigation of hybrid organisms bearing anthropomorphic and animal characteristics. The origins of their appearance were unclear; they may have been artificially generated in a lab environment, naturally mutated from some known/unknown species, or unexpectedly arrived from a distant extraterrestrial source. Or, perhaps they may have been some taxidermied critters from a fantasy land on display in a museum environment. Whatever their origins, the method I was using to relate to them was following an urge of knowing those unfamiliar creatures by organizing, classifying and categorizing them. The realization of my overdetermined tone when dealing with these unknown beings occurred after my Loser/Conqueror exhibition at SCA, and resulted in a radical change in my overall approach to the unknown. Thereafter, I sought to expand my horizons by exploring alternative and unconventional ways of knowing, leaving some space for doubt and uncertainty. I will explain this process in further detail in this chapter, starting from my initial ideas and early works and proceeding to the final outcome.
I have always been interested in the alien, the stranger, the unfamiliar, the in-between, the abnormal. I find the mystery and marginality of their being very attractive, and the combined feelings of curiosity and fear they evoke irresistible. The deviants always make me wonder more and more; asking more, learning more, knowing more. They reside somewhere near the source of my knowledge hunger. When I consider my own background, which involved moving from Turkey to Australia eight years ago, I find myself being and feeling like a stranger. Perhaps depending on an unconscious motive to know more about my own strangeness, I instinctively started my studio practice by creating hybrid beings that did not belong to any apparent place or land. Some early examples of my work on hybridity can be seen in Figures 20 to 25.

Figure 20. *Drifting Sculptures, #1-2 & #5-6*, 2014, inkjet print on hand stitched paper, 18 x 12.5cm.

Figure 21. *Pelider City*, 2014, hand printing and stitching on fabric, 33 x 30cm.
Figure 22. *Meerooskat City*, 2014, hand printing and stitching on fabric, 41 x 41cm.
Figure 23. *Pigra City*, 2014, hand printing and stitching on fabric, 32 x 29cm.
Based on my personal observations and experiences, I believe that encountering with a stranger is as hard as being a stranger. Interestingly, this encounter causes a paradoxical discomfort that results from the presence of the stranger, and ends up with a strangeness on both sides. The complex feelings that the presence of strangers arouse only promote the strangers’ strangeness. That is to say, a stranger’s being a stranger is not just due to its strangeness, but because it evokes strange feelings. Zygmunt Bauman argues that true hybrids, unfamiliars and strangers are not the “as-yet-undecided[s]” but “undecidable[s]”. They are continuous threats to the world order because they represent questions causing more questions. For him, a stranger is like an uninvited friend or a very close enemy. It “disturbs the resonance between physical and psychical distance – he is physically near while remaining spiritually remote. He brings into the inner circle of proximity the kind of difference and otherness that are anticipated and tolerated only at a distance”87 Therefore, the presence of a stranger is a constant reminder of the oppositions between friend and enemy, inside and outside, temporality and permanence, beginning and end, order and chaos.88 My exhibition titled Loser/Conqueror (Figures 26 & 27) was an attempt to approach this strangeness by invading the gallery with numerous hybrid species. Through a variety of tensions between biological and fantastical, familiar and unfamiliar, cute and weird, and quiet and might-be-wild creatures, my intention was to create an environment consisting of undecidables, in the process inciting viewers to feel strange as well.

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88 Bauman, Ambivalence, 58-60.
Figure 26. Loser/Conqueror, exhibition view at SCA Graduate School Gallery, July 2015.

Figure 27. Loser/Conqueror, exhibition view at SCA Graduate School Gallery, July 2015.
*Alien Police* and *Venom* (Figure 28) are two works primarily exposing the main concern of the exhibition. First, our suspicious, insecure and violent approach to the unknown, and second, the misty, unexpected and expansionist nature of the unknown, which might be equally unwelcoming and harmful. *Alien Police #1&2* depict the police officers’ and soldiers’ investigations of and attacks on strange, unfamiliar forms. These two pieces represent our (human species) unfriendly and hostile attitude towards the unfamiliar. Conversely, *Venom #1&2* engage with the idea of risk involved in interacting with unknown things. Expansion of the material used in the hybrid forms onto the doll bodies implies alien beings’ potential to be contaminant and invasive.

Figure 28. *Alien Police #1&2* and *Venom #1&2*, 2015, installation view at SCA Graduate School Gallery.
*Alien Police #1&2*, 2015, hand stitching on fabric, each 140 x 150cm.
*Venom #1&2*, 2015, polyurethane foam, synthetic polymer paint, dolls, tree branches, each approx. 55 x 40 x 30cm.
In fact, the motive to invade is not specific to alien intruders. It is an impulse embedded in every species’ genetic code. Thus, each species in the surreal ecosystem of Lose/Conqueror is guided by its motive to reproduce and propagate. As representative of the genetic pool of the species included in the exhibition, Nest (Figure 29) acts as a bed wherein reproducing freely and limitlessly is possible. It has a sample of each and every substance included in the making of the species. Also, because the working mechanism of Nest operates according to organic and evolutionary laws, it is mostly unforeseeable. It either allows an increase in the population of an existing kind, or enables the emergence of a new species. But, realistically each biological mechanism needs a base organism to initiate an evolution. As known from the basic biology, most of the time, the evolutionary chain starts with a very simple organic entity, i.e., a bacterium.

Roots (Figure 30) stands for the origin of things, regeneration and a new beginning. While its suspended stems signal the planting of new life forms, the fluffy bacteria beneath provide this new life with a means of evolving into new hybrid beings. Also, the complementary
video marks a time of transformation. Borrowing its title from Franz Kafka’s famous main character in The Metamorphosis, Gregor, the video draws parallels between Gregor Samsa’s waking up into a new existence and the emergence of my fantasy land. Monitoring an upside down cockroach desperately trying to turn over in slow motion, the video traps the viewer in the prolonged trauma of an awakening. As well, it draws attention to a place between a beginning and an ending. In the refreshing territory of this in-between place, new hybrid species begin to appear.

Heads, Birds, Omni Puffums, Explorer, Pop Trip and Eggs are some examples included in the exhibition. In accordance with the evolutionary and organic mechanisms, each member of these species has its own individual characteristics; and every group has unique creaturely attitudes. For example, Heads (Figure 31) is a group combined of strong, violent and fertile members, whereas the members of Birds (Figure 32) are of gentle birth, distinguished by their noble and fragile nature. Omni Puffums (Figure 33) is a family close to arboreal animals. And, like most tree-dwelling animals, while they are temperamental and wild, they tend not to be violent. Explorer (Figure 34) is a fertile reptilian hybrid who is continuously looking for food and safe shelter for the numerous children popping up from her skin. Pop Trip (Figure 35), a poisonous kind, lures other species with the fake cuteness of its sweetly coloured skin. And lastly, Eggs (Figure 36) are small creatures with fast moving capabilities. They will hatch into new larvae if they are not eaten before.
Figure 30. Roots and Gregor, 2015, installation view at the SCA Graduate School Gallery. 
Roots, 2015, stuffed fabric, fake fur, felt, approx. 300 x 150cm. 
Gregor, 2015, single channel HD video, 6min 26sec.
To me, it is very exciting to think that life is capable of generating a diversity of organic forms by transmuting one single living organism. That means, each living specimen has a potential to transform into another specimen, like Kafka’s fictitious character. As Pierre
Baldi states: “Any living organism on the planet can in principle be morphed into any other organisms by following a possible long but finite sequence of relatively small DNA transformations. Not only is it possible to morph into a gorilla, but also into a crocodile, a fly, or, for that matter, an oak tree.”89 That is to say, basically all living beings are made out of the same material. In those terms, there is no hierarchical difference between a human being and a jellyfish. This amicable understanding owes its foundation to the invention of the microscope, which made it possible to see the tiniest identical cells residing in all living bodies.

Referring to the works’ basic constituents e.g., fabric, thread and paper, in *Loser/Conqueror*, I stitched some microscopic cell images of the creatures onto paper (See Figure 37). I tried not to make any reference to samples’ sources, suggesting that because all creatures can claim the same origins, there is no superiority amongst them. Furthermore, in *Efflux* (Figure 38), I intended to convey an idea about the mutation process at the microscopic level. Suggesting infected microscope slides, the pieces in *Efflux* indicate a case in which unexpected reaction and rapid change have happened. However, the oversized scale and loose material quality of the pieces make them look more like cheap demonstrations of the incident, rather than being authentic physical objects. Together with my neat groupings and ordered categorizations of the species, that artificiality also contributed to the impact of displaying taxidermy creatures in a natural museum environment.

Figure 37. *Microscopic Cell Samplings*, 2015, hand-stitching on cotton paper, each approx. 7x4cm.

Figure 38. *Efflux*, 2015, ink and acrylic on voile, embroidery hoop, thread, each approx. 155x110cm.
Essentially, my intention in exploring strangers - the unfamiliar and the unknown - was to get to know them better by relating to them without being over-compassionate or detached. I did not employ any plan or tactic. However, my instincts and knowing habits navigated me towards a systematic approach that does not require any risk or adventure. As I pointed out in my first chapter, as human beings we are neurologically coded to avoid the unexpected. Thus, my first reflex was to fixate myself on safe certainties, such as scientific categorizations, classifications and ordering. In that sense, in accordance with Foucault and Lyotard’s respective arguments vis-à-vis the stability and credibility of scientific methods, it was not about sincerely knowing or discovering something; rather, it was about imposing my own way of knowing them. Putting myself in the position of a scientist or a museum curator, I attempted to conquer the knowledge of the unknown by dictating my order. However, as an artist, I believe in the possibility of developing a relationship with the unknown by not through the usual acts of knowing, but by embracing uncertainties and not knowing. *Loser/Conqueror* made me aware of my own strict approach to forcing the unknown to reveal itself. Since then, I have sought to create a relationship with the unknown which is more curious, ambiguous, and imperfect.

Helga Nowotny talks about the notion that Francis Jacob variously called “day science” and “night science”.\(^90\) Whereas day science is “the bright side of scientific achievement” where reasoning and certainty is in charge, night science “hesitates, falls back, sweats, wakes with a start. ... It is the place where thoughts proceed along sinuous paths, tortuous streets, but most often blind alleys. They are littered with setbacks, doubts, errors and frustrations. What guides the mind is not logic, but intuition, and what happens to push ideas towards clarity is often fortuitous.”\(^91\) If *Loser/Conqueror* is an exhibition guided by rules-of-the-day science, then my examination exhibition installation will employ the tactics of night science. I believe that science and art can and should adopt each other’s mechanisms when generating knowledge. However, scientific knowledge-making methodologies are so dominant and entrenched that most of the time we disregard art’s capability to offer alternative knowledge models. In this research, my aim is to develop an alternative knowledge model.

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understanding to expose an unconquered knowledge of unknowns through a sensitive approach combining scientific and artistic perspectives.

In this regard, the concept of nonknowledge seems the most appropriate place within the field of knowledge wherein this combination seems possible. As I suggest in my first chapter, being the knowledge of unknowns, nonknowledge is where we are aware of what we do not know. If we were not aware (as in ignorance), then I assume, that part of our knowledge would be a void, something formless, maybe just a black box. But since we have some awareness, this means that we have some solid pieces that we can work on. Those pieces can be anything and everything; recognizable or unrecognizable, useful or useless. They could turn into a known thing or could stay unknown forever: they could be a jewel or just trash. In addition, I believe that the working mechanism of knowledge (and its twin nonknowledge) is very similar to dynamic cognitive processes like learning and forgetting. As I have already argued in my second chapter, the structure of those cognitive systems should be open to exchange and transformation; they are fragmental, interchangeable and impermanent. Therefore, I imagine nonknowledge in pieces rather than being a firm single mass. Although we are aware of the pieces composing nonknowledge, we lack full comprehension of what they really are. They are still mostly unknown to us, (or partly known, or known but nonsensical). Therefore, I believe that in the main the components of nonknowledge are ambiguous, unfamiliar, indeterminate and incomplete. On the other hand, irrespective of whether they are familiar or not, they do not have to make any sense. Their togetherness might follow an unconscious order which is even unknown to the author of nonknowledge. Yet, in my opinion, the batch involving all of these pieces is far from being neat. Since nonknowledge is released from the restrictions of any cognitive structure, it is not interested in whether it is being grasped or not.  

In Loser/Conqueror, Nest was the only work that preserved its own authenticity. It resisted my scientific approach, and managed to elude my interventionist violence. It kept operating as an autonomous entity working according to its own rules. Standing as a complex mess of unknowns, Nest (Figure 39) offers a fertile ground to investigate the potentials proposed by

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92 Referring to Bataille, Chapter 1
not knowing. Parallel to Bataille’s statement quoted in the first chapter, when we give up our desire to fully comprehend and control, the abundance of possibilities starts to be intensified, as in Nest. Being freed from my control and order, the richness of life in Nest reveals itself wildly.

Figure 39. Nest (Detail)

Together with my reflections on my exhibition, my explorations of forming and depicting a knowledge of unknowns brought me to the artists dealing with unknowns, and transferring the qualities (e.g., ambiguity, impermanence, fragility, incompleteness, flux) that are necessary in nonknowledge, into their work. Inspired mainly by Franz West, Rachel Harrison and Jessica Jackson Hutchins’s amorphous forms and curious approaches to uncertainties and multiple meanings, I started creating my first ambiguous forms (See Figure 40). I employed impermanent and low-grade materials including paper, cardboard and foam rubber, and left them unfinished to suggest their incompleteness and transiency. Then, I scattered them on the floor together with some other materials and objects to test the scenery of a random spread (See Figure 41). Although the objects and forms I brought together were quite discrete, my distinctive usage of cardboard and everyday materials made them look as though they all belong to the same unknown type. However, I believe
nonknowledge to be a mixture of a variety of unknowns. Thus, I decided to work on diversifying my forms and materials to investigate the different modes of unknowns.

Figure 40. Unknown Forms (Works in Progress), 2016-ongoing

Figure 41. Form and Installation Experiment, 2016
To increase variety, I gradually added abstract fabric forms to my collection and covered some of my forms with plaster, grout and paint. By situating stuffed sculptures on top of stone-like forms, I played with different presentations of unconventional juxtapositions. Commenting on their unfixed and interchangeable positioning, I refer to these pieces as “Logic Legos” (Figure 42). Moreover, to draw attention to the material qualities and physicality of my objects, I experimented with contrasts such as colour and no-colour, soft and hard, organic and inorganic, heavy and light, finished and raw, industrial and handmade (Figure 43).
Phyllida Barlow’s generous assemblages of amorphous forms and various objects encouraged me to become bolder in my arrangements, as evident in my final installation. Her large-scale collections of contrasting and discrete materials, and her untidy display inspired me to conceptualize and visualize nonknowledge in a state of collapse and debris. However, the *collapsed field* that nonknowledge inhabits is not a place where *rupture* signals a *crisis*. Rather, rupture and random spillage provide a vast array of possibilities resulting from doubt, uncertainties and not knowing, as was the case in *Nest*. Drawing upon the idea of nonknowledge as mind’s messy storage in use, my work attempts to make this rich resource visible. Regarding these ideas, Figure 44 sketches roughly how my installation may unfold in the graduation exhibition.

Figure 44. *The Shape of Nonknowledge* (Work in Progress), 2016-ongoing

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93 Referring to Chapter 1&2
In my installation work, the combination of some carefully planned juxtapositions, together with some random gatherings in the dumped and collapsed scenery of the cluster, will blur the line between haphazardness and intentionality. Although the overall atmosphere of the exhibition will be reminiscent of a junkyard, there will be some unexpectedly finished and defined pieces shining like jewels in the heap of trash. I intend to transfer Bataille’s ecstasy and delirium into the installation through a series of nonsensical and playful arrangements. The excessive energy of the installation will allow the fruitful potential of nonknowledge. The puzzling, uncertain, ambiguous and obscure nature of not knowing will be reflected through the pieces that could not make their way to becoming explicit ideas. Eventually, the shape of nonknowledge will emerge from a messy mass (See Figures 45-46-47 depicting my work in progress).

Figure 45. The Shape of Nonknowledge (Detail #1)
Figure 46. The Shape of Nonknowledge (Detail #2)

Figure 47. The Shape of Nonknowledge (Detail #3)
Conclusion

"How might we catch some of the realities we are currently missing? Can we know them well? Should we know them? Is ‘knowing’ the metaphor that we need? And if it isn’t, then how might we relate to them?"

John Law, After Method: Mess in Social Science Research

My life has been a constant struggle to balance the conflicting aspects of my personality. For example, I have always oscillated between keeping things in perfect order and throwing them into complete confusion until they reach a state of chaos. Each molecule that is activated in my body trembles with an urge for perfection while craving a mess at the same time. Not only has my MFA project unexpectedly made me clearly aware of my own conflicts; as well, it has given me a chance to face with the polarities of my being. What I have learned from my practice over the past two years is that there is much to learn between the opposing extremes.

I began this project viewing the stranger as a source of wonder, a necessary link to complete the knowledge circle or a missing information that I needed to fulfill. With the influence of my own experiences, I approached the stranger, the unfamiliar, the unknown or the in-between with the need of a resolution. Perhaps I was after a perfect, neat, clear answer. However, after my exhibition Loser/Conqueror, the opposing half of my molecules called for another messiness by warning me against my cautious, structured and strict approach with hardly any regard for not knowing. Reflecting upon my own work, over the course of my study, I have aimed to develop a more generative, enriched and liberated relationship with the unknown.
Bataille’s passion for not knowing guided to me a world free from the rational constraints of human logic, allowing me to explore the possibilities arising from the lightness of not knowing, play and nonsense, what Bataille refers to as nonknowledge. To engage with this vision further, I studied scholars and artists whose work embraced ambiguity, enigma, doubt and uncertainty. Their works and ideas enabled me to navigate into an amorphous mass of unknowns bursting with the energy of possibilities.

My MFA study has facilitated my entry into a fresh new territory that has not only transformed me, my work and my approach to the unknown, but has allowed me to gain a more sensitive perspective that until now has been masked by habitual thinking. My creative research has sought to argue that by using art’s capability to create more complex and ambiguous relationships, it is possible to generate an alternative knowledge harbouring curious uncertainties.
Images of Work Presented for Examination

Figure 48. *The Shape of Nonknowledge*, 2016, mixed-media installation, dimensions variable

Figure 49. *The Shape of Nonknowledge* (Detail #1)
Figure 52. The Shape of Nonknowledge (Detail #4)

Figure 53. The Shape of Nonknowledge (Detail #5)
Bibliography


