



AUTHOR(S):

TITLE:

YEAR:

Publisher citation:

OpenAIR citation:

Publisher copyright statement:

This is the _____ version of proceedings originally published by _____
and presented at _____
(ISBN _____; eISBN _____; ISSN _____).

OpenAIR takedown statement:

Section 6 of the "Repository policy for OpenAIR @ RGU" (available from <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/staff-and-current-students/library/library-policies/repository-policies>) provides guidance on the criteria under which RGU will consider withdrawing material from OpenAIR. If you believe that this item is subject to any of these criteria, or for any other reason should not be held on OpenAIR, then please contact openair-help@rgu.ac.uk with the details of the item and the nature of your complaint.

This publication is distributed under a CC _____ license.

Jane Jacobs and the nature of (practice and research) work in public

Professor Anne Douglas & Chris Fremantle

Invited keynote *Public and Participative Art: Performance in Everyday Life* international symposium at the Finnish Academy of Fine Arts, December 14th & 15th 2009.

If you are working in the arts what does sustainability mean (other than fundraising)?

On The Edge started as a project in 2000/01 and has become continuing programme located between practice and research.

*You inhabit the North East of Scotland
I inhabit the South West of Scotland
We are surrounded by rich and visible references to Scotland's past
This heritage lives in our sense of the present
We are interested in art happening in the everyday
We started out by making artistic interventions in specific places*

*We work very slowly
We trust our hunches
We suspend disbelief and don't assume that we know the solution or even the form of solution
We explore different possibilities before deciding to go ahead
We believe that sometimes we might decide to do nothing*

We listen

Suzanne said to Anne "I'm interested in doing a PhD. Ian Hunter said I should speak to you". Anne recognised practitioner of international standing interested in reflecting on her practice. Anne wondered "How do you supervise a PhD student who is widely known and regarded, who has published a seminal text in the field, and who continues to develop projects around the world?"

One way might be to take the process of reflection into a more public setting, inviting practitioners interested in the issues to learn together over a 12 month period: a structured programme of invited lectures, discussions and studio sessions ending in the most public context, the Scottish Parliament. Thus Suzanne Lacy's personal research became "Working in Public" (2007). Jay Koh and Grant Kester attend parts.

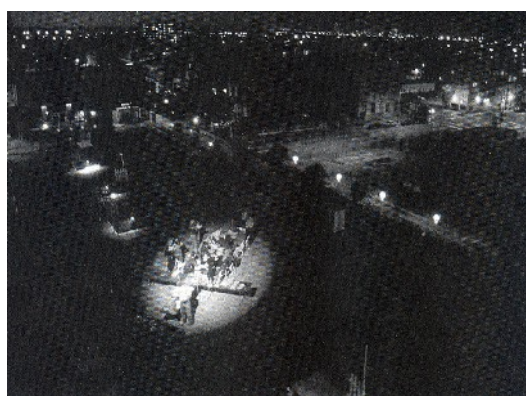


Figure 1:

Left: Suzanne Lacy's keynote, RGU, 2005

Right: *Code 33*, Suzanne Lacy Oakland, California, 1997-1999

Deborah (who runs an organisation that defines itself as a "specialist business support and development service for creative businesses and practitioners") **asked Susan** to make a Lab

in Scotland in which artists could think about leadership. Susan said that she had found it very useful to involve researchers, **so they asked Anne** to join the partnership. Talk about cultural leadership is in the air, but Deborah, Susan and Anne wanted to distinguish this from arts management. They focus on the artist in relation to the organisational leader and the policy maker. Two interwoven strands of work emerged: a Lab programme (over first a week in a beautiful arts & crafts castle in the country and then a couple of days in a bunker in Glasgow) involving artists, organisational leaders and policymakers; and a research network drawing out the learning from these and other individuals.

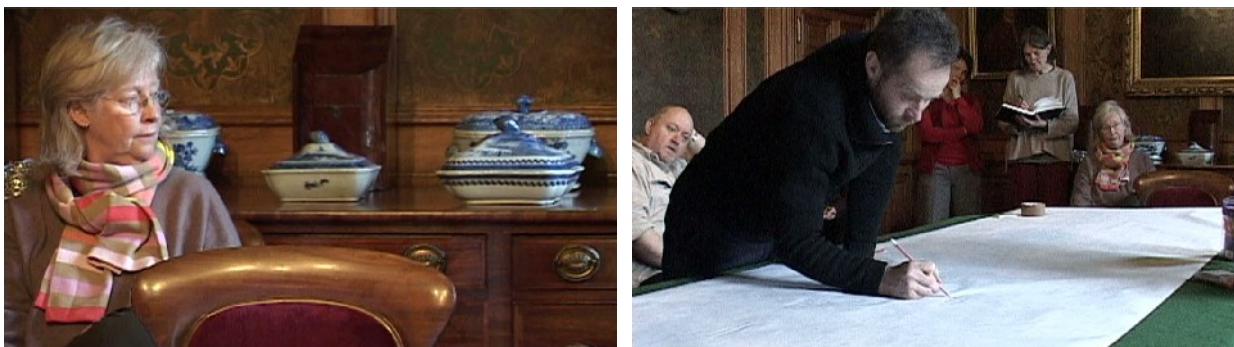


Figure 2: Artist as Leader Lab, January 2009

Left: Suzanne Benn, Director of PAL

Right: James Marriott, Director of PLATFORM drawing the leadership discussion

In 2005, as we were starting into these two new projects (*Working in Public* 2006-8, Douglas 2007 and *The Artist as Leader* 2006-9, Douglas et al. 2009), we wrote a paper entitled *Leaving the (social) ground of (artistic) intervention more fertile: an ecology of art in the everyday* (Douglas & Fremantle 2005b).¹ When we wrote the paper we were trying to make sense of work to date. We used Jane Jacobs' book *The Nature of Economies* (2000) as a means to think about sustainability. In particular we needed to understand how to 'keep going' - to grow the work as research and as practice while also deepening its significance. Jacobs offered us a framework of analysis that articulates how economies work as ecologies - as a system of interdependencies operating dynamically in relation to energy. Accepting that the practice of art is not economy, nor ecology (and ecology is itself an overused idea), nonetheless Jacobs' unpacking of dynamic systems continues to inform our thinking.

In this paper we are seeking to revisit Jacob's framework and think about the extent to which her observations might also form a methodology. Our hunch is that Jacobs' careful unpacking of ecology as a construct might be useful for artists and researchers to grasping the relationship between method, artistic creativity and art research.

Jacobs argues that economies follow the same rules as ecological systems. They behave in the same way as systems in nature: as dynamic systems of interdependency. The core of Jacobs' argument is **energy**, whether it is manifest in ecological systems or in economic systems. Our contention is that Jacobs' argument applies to cultural systems (and we take it that the arts, both practice and research, are aspects of cultural systems).

Jacobs describes ecologies and economies as **conduits** through which energy passes and is used more or less effectively. Simply, a desert uses energy inefficiently and a rainforest uses it efficiently. Jacobs defines efficiency in terms of energy being used and reused many times over as it travels through the conduit. Whether it is the energy of sunlight passing through the system of a

¹ For information about On The Edge, including the first phase of work, as well as *Working in Public* and *The Artist as Leader* see <http://www.ontheedgegeresearch.org>

rainforest, or value passing through an economy (raw materials entering the system, being processed into commodities, being sold and resold, and finally being recycled), Jacobs argues that the dynamics of the conduit are fundamental, and that we need to understand some key concepts.

The key concepts Jacobs uses are **development** and **expansion**, and **the means of evading collapse**: feedback loops, bifurcations and emergency adaptations.

It is useful to re-imagine a conduit in a less linear way, perhaps as networks, not merely as loose connections between individuals, but as clusters of interacting elements that have long term interdependencies, as multiple interconnected circuits or as a web.²

For Jacobs, **energy** is the key concept that underlies the whole argument. Our experience of living in a remote rural situation arguably provided the energy to re-explore the relationship of art making to its cultural context, and how artistic creativity might become important within experiences of social, cultural change.

Chris said imagine a landscape in which three people own the hills that surround you for 360 degrees. Imagine a village in the middle of the valley. Imagine a field on the corner of a village. You look at it everyday when you go to work – it is just across the road. What will happen to the field in the future? Nearer the city many of the fields are being covered with suburban housing. Imagine that the village was laid out by the estate as part of a programme of agricultural improvements nearly a century and three quarters ago. Now agriculture is changing. What will happen to the field? What will happen to the village?

My neighbour Pat Dunn will retire next year. I think he is the last farmer living in the village who tenants land from the estate. His father died farming and he does not want to, so he is retiring. What happens when no-one wants to farm this hard land?

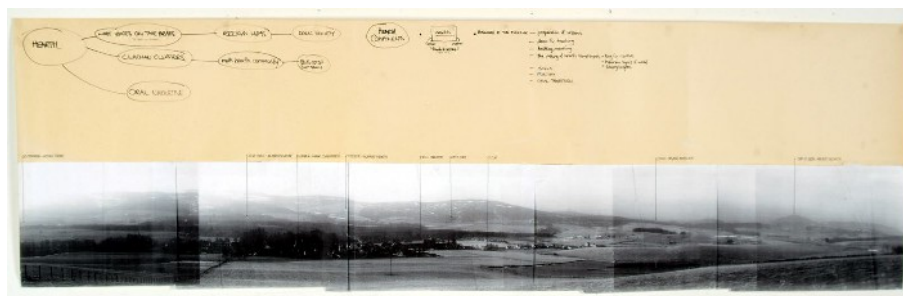


Figure 3: *Inthrow*, Lumsden, (2001-4) artist Gavin Renwick (Douglas et al. 2006)

OR

Peter and Eliane said imagine standing beneath the classical pantheon. Imagine Flora, the earth goddess; Neptune, the god of the sea; Mercury, the messenger and Luna, the moon goddess looking down on our human world. Imagine the Siege of Troy and the Boar Hunt at Caledon. Imagine these stories of power, of fear, love, success and defeat telling us about our human place in the universe. Then imagine these images consumed by flames. Our 12th century Tower House was reduced to charred fragments. It was one of many properties in this large house.

The ceiling was 400 hundred years old, and for 380 of these years it had been owned by the same Scottish family. As a Swiss family, we bought the Tower House. Two years later we had to put our family home back together again. Now fifteen years on we want to think about how we should replace the painted ceiling. It was a significant piece of Scottish heritage.

We said that we could help.

² The construct or metaphor of web has been explored by theorists such Fritjof Capra in *The Web of Life: A New Scientific Understanding of Living Systems*, Doubleday, New York, 1996 and *Hidden Connections: A Science for Sustainable Living*, Doubleday, New York, 2002.



Figure 4: Cullen Ceiling project (2001-4). Details of the 16th Century Cullen Ceiling, Cullen House, Aberdeenshire, destroyed by fire in the 1990s (Douglas 2005a).

Jacobs argues that all conduits, ecologic or economic, depend on an initial **gift of energy**, and also require infusions of energy. In ecological terms the initial gift and the regular infusions come from the sun. In economic terms these come from the natural resources in the locality of settlements. Human settlements form where there are natural resources – animal, vegetable or mineral and also geographical resources – the mouths of rivers, fords, etc.

On The Edge benefited from the infusion of energy in the form of funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Board (2001-4). This was used to leverage other funding. We also, probably more significantly, benefited from the input of energy from the individuals who became partners in the project. These partnerships with individuals (leaders of arts and heritage organisations, local councils, education as well as funders) offered the opportunity for new understandings and the energy passed on and fed back in the form of new learning.

Anne said imagine that the need for art in everyday lives has changed the way that art is made. It is a challenge. Imagine making art in a different way. Imagine learning not teaching. Imagine hearing what people might need or want from art. Imagine art forming itself from the things that you most care about, through the people that you most care about. Imagine an art that begins at home and not in the gallery.

All these different imaginations came together in a partnership.

It is important to say that energy did not always operate in this positive, developmental way. An important quality of the research space was the exercising of choice - to act or not to act, to participate or not despite the availability of funds to do so, to learn from the experience or choose learning from another source or mode of working. The exercising of choice is crucial as a quality of art and its research. Individuals consciously exercise choice and judgement in its most heightened and skilled form in the making and experiencing of art. This is true for the artist in judging a musical composition or drawing as a success or a failure, and also for the audience correspondingly experiencing the work as a process of completing it or resisting and rejecting it. In terms of the research, there were originally five projects and in the end we were only able to complete four. The fifth parted company with us in the process.

Jacobs (2000, p.15) describes **development** and **expansion** as the fundamental changes that take place to energy. Development is *qualitative* change and expansion is *quantitative* change.

“Let’s define development as significant qualitative change, usually building up incrementally. But even single instances of qualitative change can be significant.”

She goes on to describe the process of **differentiation emerging from generality** as the fundamental dynamic within development. This takes the form of a cycle. Each differentiation in turn can become a generality from which new differentiations can take place. Jacobs highlights the fact that this takes place at different levels: it is fractal in character.

This is not necessarily the same as a simple reading of evolutionary theory, of the survival of the fittest. We might see research questions as generalities and the 'answers' developed from them as differentiations. In fact this kind of artistic research rarely generates answers as such. It is discursive and leads to more questions and responses in the form of action. For example, our opening question with *On the Edge* was “How do you articulate forms of visual arts practice of quality in remote and rural areas, i.e. in contexts in which there is rich culture but limited conventional infrastructure for the arts?” We asked this question as artists, arts researchers and administrators and inhabitants of remote rural places, rather than as sociologists; as makers and dwellers within the situation, not as observers outside the situation.

In the initial stages of the research, we intuitively avoided consuming the opportunity in a conventional way. Instead we 'suspended disbelief' and sustained an open-ended exploration of ideas, ethics and principles of action much longer than might be normal. We exploited the energy offered by thinking through its implications in specific contexts. Projects then started to identify themselves by a process of recognition operating at a much deeper level of significance. *Celestial Ceiling* identified the loss of an important piece of Scottish heritage as a challenge. In responding to the challenge, we needed the space to reflect on this loss. Through the reflection it became apparent that we could do one of a number of things: nothing, reproduce the lost work, or commission new work. As the issue was given the time and space to unfold critically, it generated not one, but two commissions which we were able to attract additional funding to complete. This process is documented in one of the four project monographs (Douglas 2005a).

The description of the process of differentiation emerging from generality can be read as linear. Whilst it does take place in time, it is not necessarily cause and effect in a simple way. Jacobs (2000, p.19) describes the process within an expanded field and highlights the importance of **co-developments**.

“I mean that development cannot be usefully thought of as a ‘line,’ or even as a collection of open-ended lines. It operates as a web of interdependent co-developments. No co-development web, no development.”

The importance of co-development is in the recognition of, and valuing of, interdependence, relationship and exchange.

This is articulated from an ecological perspective by the quantum physicist and activist, Dr Vandana Shiva, a leading opponent of genetic modification and the patenting of seeds. In an interview with Wallace Heim (2003), Shiva stresses the importance of biological and cultural diversity working together.

“When I was in a tribal area in central India, one of the tribals mentioned casually that seed can’t ever be privately owned, it belongs to a whole community and they reaffirm that every year with Akti. ... Each dona is different, and they are all put together and mixed and exchanged. The mixing is both the sharing and also a reminder that isolated rice which is not being exchanged will have disease. It will be prone to pest attacks, it will lose resilience. ... But its renewal comes out of exchange,” (Heim 2003)

It is interesting to note that the exchange is of the seed, not of the bread (the product). It seems to us that this is critical. The conventional model within the arts involves only sharing at the stage of completed product. Acknowledgement of interdependence, relationship and exchange at the level of process is vital.

We understand a key aspect of our way of working to be this idea of ‘co-developmental.’

Since that first phase of work we have evolved new questions articulated through *The Artist as Leader*³ research and *Working in Public Seminars*⁴ (as well as Chris Fremantle's parallel work on

³ <http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/obj/ats/ontheedge2/artistasleader/index.html>

⁴ <http://www.workinginpublicseminars.org/>

Greenhouse Britain: Losing Ground, Gaining Wisdom and with PLATFORM⁵). Each of these started anew with a single focus such as “What does leadership mean within the practice of the arts?” or “What does it mean for the artist to work within the public sphere?” These in turn led to, on the one hand mapping new sets of issues, and on the other hand developing new activity. One of the key characteristics of On The Edge across these various projects has been bringing together practitioners with academics, often with individuals from other disciplines or roles, whether policy-makers or inhabitants. This has formed what might be termed ‘domains of co-development.’

The Artist as Leader and *Working in Public Seminars* fed each other. The *Working in Public Seminars* arose out of the process of supporting Suzanne Lacy to undertake doctoral research. Lacy herself is a case study in artists leading through their practice. Her work as an artist has therefore informed and been informed by both projects.

The second type of change that takes place in the conduit is **expansion** (Jacobs, 2000, p.45).

“Development and expansion are tightly interlocked. They make each other possible.”

Expansion as a concept is not simply growth, and Jacobs observes that expansion does not overwrite itself. In both ecologies and economies expansion is a fundamental principle within an understanding that everything is seeking a state of dynamic stability, and in doing so constantly seeking to evade collapse. The interlocked qualitative process of differentiation also means that in both ecologies and economies new spaces are constantly being opened up. Jacobs (2000, p.46) describes this as,

“Contrast that (the loss or refraction of energy within a desert) with the energy flow through a well-developed forest ecosystem. In the forest, energy flow is anything but swift and simple, because of the diverse and roundabout ways that the system’s web of teeming, interdependent organisms uses energy. Once sunlight is captured in the conduit, it is not only converted, but repeatedly reconverted, combined and recombined, cycled and recycled, as energy / matter is passed around from organism to organism. Energy flow through an intricate conduit is dilatory and digressive.”

This argument is at the heart of Jacobs’ interpretation of the economic dynamic of cities in particular. She argues that the more complex and sophisticated the web of co-development, the more expansion results.

Expansion has proved to be the most challenging of Jacobs’ principles in relation to artistic creativity. This may be a consequence of new knowledge needing to negotiate its position in relation to what was previously known and acted upon. It may also be a particular issue for radical forms of practice that challenge the conventions of modes of production, distribution and reception in art. If new forms of practice do not negotiate their position in relation to institutionally inscribed practices, they remain experimental with the risk of dissipation (or they overturn hierarchies in revolutions).

Jacobs (2000, p.46) unpacks dissipation in the ways that ecologies and economies seek to **evade collapse**.

“Eventually, a system discharges all the energy it receives. Energy / matter can be converted from various forms to various other forms, but it can neither be created nor destroyed. To be sure, it can be stored for short or long periods, as in corpses before they decay, timber, books, buildings, fossil fuels, even limestone. Ultimately, a system’s discharged energy is lost to it by radiating outward.”

Jacobs argues that all ecologies and all economies do constantly seek to evade collapse and that the

⁵ See <http://www.greenhousebritain.net>, <http://www.platformlondon.org> and <http://www.remembersarowiwa.com> for further information.

tactics by which they do this simply sit alongside the tactics of development and expansion within a portfolio that is constantly in action. One might criticise the terminology of evading collapse because it suggests that the evasion is only taking place at critical moments of imminent collapse. One has to bear in mind that Jacobs' assumption is that everything is constantly threatened by collapse.

Jacobs asserts that there are only four tactics for evading collapse: positive-feedback loops, negative-feedback loops, bifurcations, and emergency adaptations.

Positive-feedback and negative-feedback loops are fundamental to ecologies and economies equally. Positive loops encourage expansion. Negative loops act as a brake. Subsidy negates the effect of negative feedback loops. Jacobs' example is fishing. As you fish out inshore waters you are forced to go further utilising more fuel and taking greater risks. This becomes a limiting factor unless fishing is subsidised.

These loops are also the means by which development processes interact with each other at the level of ecosystems and economies. They are where the processes of expansion attain inherent limits and to not exceed them, and where organisms do not simply overwrite each other within ecosystems. In all cases the feedback loops are multiple, complex and interrelated and take place within the conduit we discussed earlier. Jacobs (2000, p.101) says,

“...beneficent loops operate to achieve stability up to their limit; from that point on, they act to maintain stability, but they're still as necessary as before. The system must still continue to be dynamic or it will deteriorate. A vicious circle's limit is not an achieved dynamic equilibrium but collapse. It dead-ends”

We have used a number of strategies to create feedback loops. One of the key strategies are structured by iterative gatherings - the bringing together of the live projects during the first phase of On The Edge acted as a feedback loop - it strengthened the projects by keeping the big picture in focus, but that same process probably also acted as a negative feedback loop for those who didn't want to go in that direction. Negative feedback loops in Jacob's terms are a good thing. Specifically they stop rampant growth. But they also may stop monocultures developing, and conversely they may, in cultural and economic terms, help by keeping us focused: one of the dangers is the dissipation of energy into too many different developments.

We have also used publications and presentations through events, web sites, books, leaflets and other forms of dissemination as ways to create feedback loops. Rather than leaving the 'making public of the work' to the end, we have sought to expose our thinking as we go along - this makes the projects more vulnerable, and can be distracting, but on the one hand generates positive feedback from a wider audience and on the other hand ensures that the process of development does not go down blind alleys.

The development of feedback loops in these terms and also across different groups of participants resonates with Dewey's (1997) understanding of effective learning,

“Activity that is not **checked by observation** of what follows from it may be temporarily enjoyed. But intellectually it leads nowhere. It does not provide knowledge about the situations in which action occurs nor does it lead to clarification and expansion of ideas.”

Jacobs highlights examples where feedback controls can become vicious circles, and of course feedback controls do not make for perpetual motion. This essay opens by highlighting method in artistic practice and research as a form of undue constraint. It is therefore the case that when the feedback loops start to generate instability, instead of stability, other means to evade collapse are required. These are **bifurcations** and **emergency adaptations**.

Bifurcations are forks where a new development is established, often as a result of opportunity. Jacobs makes the point that bifurcations share many characteristics of development, but involve a

change in direction. Jacobs' examples of bifurcations are indicative: the development of air-breathing vertebrates from an ancestry of marine vertebrates, the development of aqueducts to address the water needs of cities or the development of elevators to make skyscrapers functional.

The bifurcation occurred at the point of opportunity or necessity. In retrospect we can see an emerging instability in the development process (lack of fresh water threatening the health and economy of the city) and the bifurcation results in collapse being evaded. This does not change the fundamental state of dynamic stability. It does not create a stable system. New instabilities are inherent within the bifurcation.

The original On The Edge project arose in part because of a need to find ways to work differently. Both the researchers and the partner organisations found that urban models of cultural provision did not work well in remote and rural contexts. In exploring different ways of developing visual art of quality, our work perhaps generated doubt and instability around what had previously been considered beyond question. Key to alternative approaches was assuming that the work would be developed with inhabitants rather than for them, and that the audience for the work would be developed as the work was developed. This still remains a highly contested issue.

Finally **emergency adaptations**, which is not a catch-all for anything else, is rather a description of those means of evading collapse such as the body responding to infection by creating a fever, or the government responding to war by imposing rationing. These are temporary means of evading collapse when it is expected that normality will recur, and is therefore different from bifurcations.

Although we have focused on energy, it is the characteristics of the conduit (desert or rain forest, village or metropolis) which in fact determine the extent to which a rich and diverse use and re-use of energy is possible. Organisation is therefore the key to maximising the use of energy. By this we do not mean organisations, but the structures that can be put in place that organise. Our experience tells us that this methodic way of working is particularly relevant in the context of both research and social practices. We need to be conscious of processes that embed the work in the context, connect it to what is around it, and enable it to evolve.

These processes also need to be of a particular quality of open-endedness serving artistic creativity and learning simultaneously. Artistic creativity and artistic research are both bounded and free. They are tied to structural laws that carry meaning beyond the maker - the canonical in art, the methodological in research. They also embody 'a sense of quality' that represents an independent possibility of knowledge, the possibility of re-contextualising what we previously knew, of handling potential rather than certainty, regulation or routine.

But the single most important critique of Jacobs is of positivism. Whilst the root of positivism is in the rejection of metaphysics and the development of knowledge from actual sense experience, the danger with Jacobs' articulation is that a simplistic reading equates her concept of development with progress, and her concept of expansion with capitalist models of growth.

To be continued...

References

- Delday, H., 2006. *Close as a construct to critically investigate the relationship between the visual artist and the everyday*. Thesis (Ph.D). Aberdeen: The Robert Gordon University.
- Dewey, J. 1997. *Experience and Education*. New York: Simon & Schuster Pocket Books
- Douglas, A. 2007. *Working in Public Seminars* [online]. Aberdeen, Robert Gordon University. [online]. Available from: http://www2.rgu.ac.uk/subj/ats/ontheedge2/workinginpublicseminars/seminar_menu.html [Accessed 9 December 2009].
- Douglas, A, (ed) with Fremantle, C. & Delday, H, 2006. *Inthrow: Revealing Change* The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art, University of Dundee ISBN 1 901 085 80 5
- Douglas, A (ed) 2005a. *Celestial Ceiling* The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Historic Scotland. ISBN 1 90-1 085 813
- Douglas, A. & Fremantle, C. 2005b. *Leaving the (social) ground of (artistic) intervention more fertile: an ecology of art in the everyday* In: *SK2: Aesthetic Practice and Aesthetic Insight Conference Proceedings*. Bergen: National Academy of the Arts. [online]. Available from http://www.academia.edu/385592/The_Dynamics_of_the_Edge [Accessed 21.2.2015].
- Heim, W., 2003. *Begin with the Small*, The Ashden Directory. [online] Available from http://www.ashdendirectory.org.uk/featuresView.asp?pageIdentifier=2013724_25858706&view. [Accessed 11 December 2014].
- Jacobs, J., 2000. *The Nature of Economies*. New York, Modern Library
- Kaprow, A. (J. Kelley ed.), 2003. *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press
- Kester G., 2005. *Conversation Pieces: Community + Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley (CA): University of California Press

Further Reading

- Bourriaud, N., 2002. *Relational Aesthetics*. Translated by Simon Pleasance & Fronza Woods with the participation of Mathieu Copeland. France: les presses du reel
- Bourriaud, N., 2009. *Altermodern*. London: Tate Publishing
- Carey, J., 2005. *What Good Are The Arts?* London: Faber and Faber
- Douglas, A (ed.) 2005b. *How might we revalue traditional ways of making?* The Robert Gordon University in collaboration with Performing Arts Labs, London ISBN 1 901 085 82 1
- Gadamer, H., 2006. *Truth and Method*. London: Continuum
- Maharaj, S 2009. *Know-how and No-How: stopgap notes on "method" in visual art as knowledge production*. Art&Research: A Journal of Ideas, Contexts and Methods. Volume 2. No. 2 <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v2n2/maharaj.html> [accessed 23 February 2015]
- Matarasso, F., 1997. *Use or Ornament? The social impact of participation in the arts*. Stroud (Glos): Comedia