

playing with space:

Annika Kristensen in conversation with Michaela Gleave

For the better part of the last two decades, Michaela Gleave has played with space. Physical space, yes, in the sense that we demarcate and understand it, but also space that is ineffable, incomprehensible and largely impossible to measure or define. Working across a diversity of media and materials, Gleave's practice is largely rooted within the history and context of installation, often working to create designed situations (from constructed spaces within white cube galleries to staged performances and smart phone applications) within which the audience may encounter other, unearthly concepts of space, far beyond such physical or tangible confines. In a recent work, *A Galaxy of Suns* 2016-ongoing, Gleave has worked with a composer and app developer to literally *play* space, presenting, through both ephemeral live performance and a permanent smart phone app, a real-time and location-specific sonification of the stars as they rise and fall over the horizon. From the comfort of my living room, I watch and listen via the app as gentle waves of light and ambient microtonal sounds bleed out into the still darkness of a sleepless night. From 2433 light years away, Leo Minor chimes in with ochre light, coming into discordant harmony with the pink of Pisces (628 light years away) and the cerulean blue of Perseus (432 light years away). Both visible and invisible to the naked eye, these constellations – so distant and unknowable in reality – are translated into forms both familiar and beguiling.

'That is how we construct space', wrote George Perec in his 1974 classic *Species of Spaces* (from which this text borrows its title), 'with an up and a down, a left and a right, an in front and a behind, a near and far.'¹ Gleave's motive is, in many ways, to break down this 'near and far', mixing scientific research with an artistic sensibility, perceptions of reality with the magic of illusion, to create an awareness of space that is altogether more ambiguous and awe-inspiring. From early works examining weather phenomena, to a more recent, and enduring, interest in the wider universe, the success of Gleave's practice has been to examine fundamental questions about the natural world through the empathetic perspective of our uniquely human experience of it.

This conversation took place virtually across space and time, connecting Gleave's studio in Sydney to my kitchen in Fremantle, on Thursday 31 March 2022. A biography, of sorts, the discussion charts a trajectory through Gleave's awakening and development as an artist, considering critical influences, artistic processes and methodologies, as well as key projects. Throughout, Gleave alludes to this distinction between 'near and far', acknowledging the tensions between logic and intuition, and describing the benefits of the discipline of art, as opposed to science, as a field in which to explore the wonders of our universe. In talking to Gleave, I am reminded of something that the philosopher and author Alain de Botton once wrote of the late American conservationist Rachel Carson, who – through her evocative and impassioned writings – is credited with advancing the global environmental movement: 'It is perhaps her most radical idea of all: that it is love, rather than guilt, which is the key to transforming humanity's relationship with nature.'² Through her absorbing and ambitious projects, Gleave's influence is equally profound, opening audiences' minds to transformative ideas, and awakening their own *sense of wonder*.³

Annika Kristensen (AK): Michaela, your projects traverse a diverse array of media – including performance, installation, photography, sculpture, video and digital projects – and can be broadly said to be informed by scientific theory and enquiry. And yet despite an interest in natural phenomena and the environment – in weather systems, stars and the universe more broadly – there is an innate interest in humankind within your work, and in the deep human desire for knowledge and

¹ Perec, G. (1974) *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*. Reprint, London: Penguin Classics, 2008, p 82.

² de Botton, A (ed.) *Great Thinkers*. London: The School of Life, 2016, p. 288

³ Reference to the title of Rachel Carson's book, *The Sense of Wonder*, published posthumously in 1965.

understanding. More than anything, I would say that the diverse output of your practice is united by a *sense of wonder*. To begin, I wonder if you might how this *sense of wonder* was ignited for yourself, in your early life and on your pathway to becoming an artist?

Michaela Gleave (MG): I was instilled with an early love of learning by my parents who were both teachers. They were also European immigrants, so I had a particular sense of perspective about where my family had come from, and where I lived. I was born in an indigenous community in the Northern Territory and moved to north-west Tasmania as a child, so I had very diverse early experiences of what the world could be, as well as a sense that there were things to explore beyond my immediate surroundings. One of the formative moments in my life was thinking about this possibility of expansion and, essentially, that's what I try to generate within my artworks: moments where audiences' conceptions of reality explode, and all of these other potentials become possible.

One of the first such moments that I can remember was finding out where babies came from. I ran up the road to tell our neighbour because I just so excited about this explosion in my head. I remember thinking: 'Wow, I've just found out this really key piece of knowledge about how the world and life works.' I also recall my dad telling me two momentous things: firstly, that we are all made of stardust – which is a phrase that I have used in my work for various iterations of text projects – and secondly, that the universe was constantly expanding into nothingness. I try to recreate this sense of transformation for the viewer. As a child you are constantly alert to new and exciting things, but as adults, we tend to become far more stable in our sense of reality. I'm still seeking moments where I can find a schism in reality and explode that stable worldview to access other possibilities. A lot of my work has been about examining the edges of our knowledge and perception, and suggesting what might exist beyond the peripheries of our life experiences.

AK: Can you talk a little about some of the early influences on your work, particularly on the role of conceptual and installation-based practices, and how these have shaped your own process, methodologies and means of presenting your work?

MG: Fundamentally, I think of myself as an installation artist, and that sensibility carries through all the work that I make. Although I've diversified my practice to a significant extent, the idea of the existence of an artwork in physical time and space is always key, even in print-based works.

I grew up in country Tasmania, before the internet, and didn't see any contemporary art as a child. I was fortunate to have a gap year in central Europe when I was 18, which is when I encountered installation art for the first time. The first work that I saw that was a real immersive experience, transforming the whole environment, was Gia Edzgeradze's *Situated in the Eclipse (Do you mind it honey?)* 1999, presented at Tate St Ives in Cornwall. There was a room full of rotting carrots, which I found quite exciting. After that, I sought out contemporary art wherever I went and had another important experience at the Palais de Tokyo in 1999, discovering a work for which an artist had mapped a journey through an entire day. I remember, as part of the installation, that there was a sand dune representing the morning, and a cubby made out of blankets that symbolised the middle of the day. You had to get down on your hands and knees to crawl through the cubby, and this physical requirement of the audience's body, and the way that the experience activated of all of your senses, was really compelling to me. The evening was represented by a darkened room full of stars.

But the really significant moment for me, which crystallised my desire to go to art school, was seeing Ann Veronica Janssen's work for the Belgian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale [*Horror Vacui* 1999]. I had no idea what the Venice Biennale was at that time, but I happened to be in the city staying at a hostel at the time, and one of the guests suggested I visit. Janssens had filled the entire pavilion with fog, which was so dense that you had to move very slowly as you couldn't see far ahead of you. Because the space itself was just white, there was nothing to actually see. The work required the

presence of other people in the space to activate it, and because everybody had to move so slowly it created the distinct impression that time had been slowed down. That was a critical moment for me, I remember thinking 'Wow, if art can slow down time, it doesn't get any better than that.'

AK: In addition to artists, have there been any particular thinkers or writers that have been critical for you?

MG: I have a background in classical music. I played in orchestras as a kid and those experiences are still some of the highlights of my life in the sense of being part of an enormous thing that you almost can't even feel your own input into, but together you're creating sound as a spatial construct. I was particularly drawn to pieces of classical music like Wagner's *The Ring Cycle* for example, really powerful, epic works. This idea of collaborators and mediums coming together is becoming more prevalent in my more recent practice, where there is a dissolve between disciplines and a focus on a singular, total work.

In terms of writers and thinkers, Gaston Bachelard's classic *The Poetics of Space* [1958] was a really key influence early in my practice. *Art and Physics* [1991] by Leonard Shlain also occupied a significant period of my thinking, considering the parallel advancement of the subjects of art and physics from the ancient Greeks onwards. When I was starting out as an artist I was primarily focused on ideas of sensory perception, and, as I've progressed, the idea of what might exist beyond what humans can perceive has also led me to question various systems of knowledge – their structures and limitations. Most recently, I've enjoyed Jo Marchant's *The Human Cosmos: Civilisation and the Stars* [2020], which really interrogates how our human experience of the world is structured by these systems of knowledge.

The cultural context here in Australia, as well as my family background, has also been of influence. My dad is English and my mother is German – she was raised in a US-occupied part of West Germany – so I grew up with a strong understanding of what had happened in Europe during the Second World War. Meanwhile here in Australia, First Nations culture was decimated by British colonisers, and to my mind the acknowledgment of that has been nowhere near as profound as it should be. These contexts and life experiences have led me to question the role that science in particular has had in erasing other forms of knowledge, and in facilitating actions like colonialism.

Another really great book is Rosalind William's *Notes on the Underground: An Essay on Technology, Society, and the Imagination* [2008]. It looks mostly at English and French literature from the 18th century, around the time of the industrial revolution, and considers the cultural shifts that needed to occur – such as the diminished standing of native peoples, and the negating of intuition, perception and experience – before practical manoeuvres, such as the advent of the industrial revolution and the colonisation project, could take place.

AK: Perhaps it's interesting to consider the relationship, and indeed tension between, ideas of art and science; the rational versus the irrational; knowledge versus intuition in your work. You make work for an art context, that is heavily rooted in science. What does presenting these ideas for an art audience, and in a gallery or an art-specific context, allow for – that perhaps might not be possible through scientific research itself?

MG: I've chosen to be an artist and not a scientist because I can see the gaps in scientific systems. As an artist, I feel like I'm much better placed to explore the human qualities of this subject matter. In 2011/12, I undertook a residency with CSIRO Astronomy and Space Science. What I had been trying to do at the time, through my art practice, was to connect audiences with grand narratives of the universe, or to forces that are well beyond the regular human activities that we are engaged with here

on Earth. What I realised during the residency is that science is trying to do exactly the same thing, which is essentially to search for meaning. That's the innate human drive, I guess, to generate meaning for ourselves. Here art has a really vital role to play, because it allows for other ways of generating meaning that aren't literal or scientific. There is still something really profound, I think, in *feeling*.

AK: Is it about creating a balance of reason and emotion perhaps?

MG: That's right. Someone gave a great speech at one of my graduation ceremonies where they described artists as working in the gaps between knowledge. I think that's really key because there are enormous gaps in human knowledge, and art allows for us to consider forms of knowledge that are not acknowledged by science. I think it's important that we keep other knowledge systems alive, whether they be artistic explorations of what's going on in science and society, or other ancient, more traditional forms of knowledge.

AK: You mentioned something interesting in an earlier conversation that we have had, which was that you liked putting audiences in dangerous situations. Do artistic contexts perhaps also allow for more risk than scientific disciplines, which can be quite rigid?

MG: There is a description of science as being on the edges of the ocean, trying to understand the unknown from its periphery, whereas artists seek to drop straight into the middle of it. Taking people outside of their comfort zones is for me a very exciting prospect because it forces people to open up to experiences that they might not otherwise seek out. What I love most about being an artist, is that you can make art with and about anything. I also don't have to be an expert in any of the fields that I'm referencing, I can cherry-pick beautiful ideas – which probably sounds a little bit simplistic – but it's the beautiful ideas that create moments of expansion for audiences that can be profoundly life-changing. There is also the problem of science always needing to provide evidence, but that's not how the world works. Just because we can't provide tangible evidence doesn't mean that something is not real.

AK: It's interesting the freedom that can come from being an amateur, for want of a better word, from not necessarily being an expert in any one field. As an artist, it's important to be curious, to be aware of the limits of your own knowledge, and also to recognize how you might benefit from working with others who do have specific skills, knowledge or experiences. In your early work, you were often figuring out things on your own. How has your practice shifted and evolved through a direct engagement with scientists? And can you elaborate upon some of these relationships and what you've learned in the process of working directly with people who are experts?

MG: The CSIRO residency was an incredibly formative experience. I went into the residency thinking that I knew a little bit about astronomy but I very quickly realised that I knew almost nothing; I had no idea how little we actually know as humans about fundamental things. I came to understand that somebody sitting at one desk won't necessarily understand what the person next to them is doing, because the field is just so vast and the amount that is unknown is incalculable.

My first goal was just to try and grasp enough of the language to have a conversation with the scientists. Generally, collaborating with scientists has allowed me to access so much knowledge that I don't hold within myself, and I can make use of other people's expertise to create work that I would have no hope of making by myself. It's dramatically expanded my horizons and exploded the possibilities for my practice. I don't have to learn how to do everything in order to create my work anymore. I'm much more efficient in many ways. And the joy of learning new things in the process of making an artwork is where the thrill is for me. If I don't learn new things during a project, I feel like it hasn't been terribly successful.

AK: We've spoken a little bit about some of the limitations of scientific thought, research and knowledge, and you've also discussed how that has led you to consider other forms of knowledge, whether that's indigenous knowledge systems or other cultural beliefs, intuition, stories or folklore. Are these alternative systems of knowledge also something that you might like to explore further in your work through direct collaboration or otherwise?

MG: Definitely. Another revelation that I took home from the CSIRO residency was how earth-based the language of astronomy is. I had thought that astronomers would have their heads floating around freely in the cosmos, but I soon discovered that their heads and feet are firmly planted here on Earth, and that all we can ever do is look out from our fixed position. It was also revealing the degree to which all knowledge is cumulative, building upon prior knowledge. This is particularly evident in astronomy through the language that is used. The common name of most of the stars in western science are based on Arabic, Greek, or Latin words. The history of knowledge as it's been passed around the Mediterranean is captured in these words that we now use. Some of the words were translated and then mistranslated back again, with their meanings also shifting through that process. Etymology is quite fascinating for the way that it stores information as it travels down through time, in the same way that cultural beliefs are often passed down through oral tradition.

I was also astonished at the contrast between western science, which only relatively recently began to consider ideas of dark matter, and First Nation's stories here in Australia that pay attention to the darkness in the sky. The Emu in the Sky, for example, is an indigenous asterism that is defined as much by the dark areas of the night sky as it is the stars. If western science hadn't previously discounted this knowledge, we'd be so much richer, and might have come to scientific realisations in a different way.

AK: Let's talk now about some specific projects, as if to trace a trajectory between your work from art school until now. What were some key early projects for you – perhaps works like *Cloud Field* 2007 or *Raining Room* 2009?

MG: The experience of Ann Veronica Janssens' *Horror Vacui* stayed with me throughout my undergraduate degree. Somewhere along the line, I remember being unsure about what I was making. I was in the bath and noticed the water droplets resting on the tiles. They seemed the perfect metaphor for the multiplicity of reality, and the idea of individual versus collective experiences. The water droplet became central to my early practice, explored through the forms of cloud and rain. I also used sound, as another metaphor for the multiplicity of reality, and as a concrete example of how the mechanisms that we use to perceive reality can be so easily distorted. In general, my practice attempts to interrogate the idea of reality. That began through considering the role of sensory perception, primarily through sight, and then later through touch, smell and sound as I gradually expanded my own ideas.

The built environment, architecture, and the use of rectilinear space in the room constructions that I made early in my career were also important investigations into very practical forms of illusion. I never wanted to hide the mechanisms of the constructions of these works, in order to give people a sense of how their own understanding of the work is created. I'm interested in architecture for the role that it plays in shaping our understanding of the world around us. In 1999 I also visited Berlin, which at the time was at the tail end of massive reconstruction post-1989, and I had a light bulb moment when I realised that cities were themselves artificial reality systems, constructed entirely by humans.

AK: When did your interests begin to extend beyond the earthly realm, to consider the universe more broadly?

MG: The weather was always a key reference in my early practice as an example of something that we can't quite ever completely control, perceive or understand. And then as consciousness, and collective acceptance of, climate change began to increase, working with the weather became less and less satisfying to me because humans were clearly having an impact upon it. That's what prompted me to move out to explore the cosmos and stars.

Between 2007–09 I made works such as *Raining Room (Seeing Stars)* 2009, which was presented at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. This work was a reference to James Turrell, who has also been an important artistic influence, and considered our mind's ability to generate light. When you get up quickly, for example, you see stars, and the light that I was recreating in these raining works was in reference to those stars. The jump to real stars was then second nature, and further pivotal projects followed, including as *Our Frozen Moment* 2012, shown at Carriageworks in Sydney, which embraced the optical illusion of a field of stars.

In 2010, I took myself off to Europe again. My primary goal was to break out of the practice that I had developed at art school and to figure out how to set myself up as an artist without being so heavily reliant on a studio and epic material requirements. Early in my practice I was preoccupied with trying to make work that was tangible and real, to the point where I wasn't sure if it was even OK to document my works, and I certainly wouldn't have presented the work as documentation. But again, I realised that way of working was limiting. I wanted to challenge to myself to make work overseas where I'd have no access to my usual support structures, and where I'd need to learn to make work purely as documentation because I couldn't easily transport it home.

I Would Bring You the Stars 2010, made at Vatnajökull icecap in Iceland, was an important piece from this time. Performance had found its way into my practice quite early, not just through the use of an audience to activate the work, but by using my own body as well as those of other people, often employed as manual labour. To make the work, I collected leftover fireworks from families in the village where I was staying, made a little bomb and exploded it. The performance was just for myself, an audience of one, and thereafter it could only be experienced as documentation. *I Would Bring You the Stars* was also the first work for which I tried to physically connect with the universe, the light from the explosion theoretically travelling out into the universe forever. There was poetry and romance in that gesture, but also futility and violence. At the end of the project there was nothing left. Much of my work is temporal and an experience that only exists within a limited timeframe.

AK: We've talked about working with scientists, but more recently you have been collaborating with artists from other disciplines – including composers, choreographers and costume designers, as well as digital programmers and other technicians. How are these relationships informing your practice?

MG: In part, it's a response to my artistic vision becoming more ambitious and wanting to do certain things that I don't have time to learn. The work itself has to drive the collaboration; the idea has to influence the outcome.

The first work that required external expertise to provide a solution was for *The World Arrives at Night (Star Printer)* 2014. I wanted to make a work where time would be visible up and down the length of a long wall at the *Gallery of Modern Art (GOMA)* in Brisbane. I try not to use cutting edge technology in my work because I don't want the technology itself to be foregrounded in that way, so I used a dot matrix printer which was perfect for visualising the idea of time compressing and expanding. I tried for six months to make that work myself, but I just didn't have the skills. I don't know how to code, I can't program. And then I happened to connect with an astrophysicist, somebody I knew from school, by

coincidence. I mentioned the project and he said: 'Oh, that's a lazy Sunday afternoon of programming for me.' I realised then that I could get a whole lot more done if I went to experts and outsourced certain requirements. Later, I posted an image of that printer on social media and a composer sent me a message offering to turn the data into sound. That's how *A Galaxy of Suns* 2016 was born. Finding someone that you can talk about your work is a rare and beautiful thing and these collaborations are really valuable relationships to me on so many levels.

AK: These works – despite the diverse media of their execution – are united by a sense of temporality and performativity. They employ the common materials of light, space and time. Is this interest in time an abiding preoccupation across your practice?

MG: The idea of sculpting, not about time or in time, but *with* time is the holy grail of my practice. As humans, we don't even really understand what time is, which I think is tremendously exciting. I hope to continue to find ways to explore what time might be and how humans experience it – especially through large-scale installations and physical, embodied sensations for the audience.

AK: To end, I want to reflect on a quote that you had shared with me, from Jo Marchant's book *The Human Cosmos*...

It has taken us millenia to remove our experience of the cosmos from our understanding of it, and to build the mathematical grid of physics. The resulting framework of knowledge is strong, elegant, and vitally important. But it is limited. No matter how sophisticated it gets, it can only ever be an abstraction, a simplified picture drawn from measurable data alone. The laws of physics might seem impenetrable, but they represent a filter that, by definition, captures only one aspect of our lived experience.

Can you reflect on the significance of this quote for you – which so beautifully encapsulates your own interests not only in the natural world, but crucially in the uniquely human experience of the many wonders of it?

MG: That quote confirms my reason to exist and to do what I do. It perfectly illustrates the reason why I'm an artist and not a scientist. All we can ever really believe is our own perception; we exist as individual lived experiences within the context of an amassed body of knowledge that we generate as humans.

Human knowledge is constantly being rewritten. Facts are not fundamental truths, they are propositions. Time writes over itself in an interesting way. My hope is that ideas within art, as opposed to science, are less able to be overwritten. Perhaps that's one of the reasons that I lean towards making temporal projects. If you make a work in the moment, then it can only ever exist in the context of that moment. If the idea has validity at the time, then potentially it might continue to have validity into the future...

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