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# **In Lostness Possibilities are Found: Is it possible to define the value of lostness through contemporary art practice?**

**Laura M R Harrison**

Paper presented at NAFAE symposium *Research Practice Practice Research*

15 July 2016

More information about the symposium can be found at the following link:

<http://www.nafae.org.uk/events/research-practice-practice-research>

# In Lostness Possibilities are Found:

Is it possible to define the value of lostness  
through contemporary art practice?



On location, Beckfoot, July  
2015

Laura M R Harrison

Institute of the Arts, University of Cumbria

My talk will focus on methods that have become central to my practice and the investigation of my overarching research title *In Lostness Possibilities are Found: Is it possible to define the value of lostness through contemporary art practice?*

This is aligned with a couple of the questions raised by this conference: 'Why are the methods you are using appropriate for your research aim? And why might they be more appropriate than other methods?'

However, before discussing the methodologies I would like to introduce two of the main themes within my work, lostness and darkness, in order that the methodologies discussed are understood within the context of my practice and research aims.

# Lostness: It is all in the mind

Lostness: A feeling of being psychically lost: A vexation of spirit: the sense of being unsure what one is meant to be doing in life: of having unclear direction, desires or aims

Dictionary definition:

lost: *adj* **1** unable to find one's way; not knowing one's whereabouts: unable to be found: unable to understand or to cope with a situation. **2** that which has been taken away or cannot be recovered: (of time or an opportunity) not used advantageously; wasted: having died or been destroyed.

Oxford University Press 2005

Etymology:

lost (adj.): "defeated," c.1300: "wasted, spent in vain," c.1500; also "no longer to be found" (1520s), from past participle of *lose*.

[www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

For the past two years, the driving force behind my work has been lostness which I broadly define as:

The feeling of being psychically or mentally lost. Lostness is a profound vexation of the spirit, the sense of being unsure what one is meant to be doing in life, of having unclear direction, desires or aims.

This is a feeling I am very familiar with and I use the term lostness as I have found no word in common usage that adequately describes this feeling.

Although lostness suggests a link, linguistically at least, to lost, my definition of lostness is quite distinct from the etymological origin and dictionary definitions of lost. I've selected a couple of examples to demonstrate this:

(As per slide)

I propose that lost suggests having been aware, or in possession, of something in the first place in order for 'lost' (or the loss) to be recognised. For example, you need to have been aware of having keys in order for you to understand that they are lost. Lostness, on the other hand, is a state where things are fundamentally unclear. Lost suggests something physical, whether this be in relation to an object or our physical bodies, whereas lostness refers only to the mental and the psyche.

Throughout my investigation of lostness I have found it important to try and maintain this distinction between lost and lostness, in order that the investigation is true to the research aims, and indeed this differentiation has, over time, had a direct impact on the way I make work.

As well as defining lostness it was important for me to define the approach to the subject within my practice. What emerged was a desire to investigate the enormous possibilities that lostness might afford, the sense of potential within uncertainty, rather than focusing on the difficulties that might too easily take precedence. In this way the value of lostness might also remain open and full of possibilities.

# Darkness: A time of philosophising

Darkness: *noun* **1** the partial or total absence of light; night: the quality of being dark in colour **2** wickedness or evil: unhappiness or gloom: secrecy or mystery

Dark: *adj* **1** with little or no light: (of a theatre) closed; not in use **2** (of a colour or object): not reflecting much; approaching black in shade: (of someone's skin, hair or eyes) brown or black in colour: (of a person) having such skin, hair or eyes. **3** (of a period or situation) characterised by great unhappiness or unpleasantness: deeply pessimistic: (of an expression) angry: suggestive of or arising from evil; sinister **4** hidden from knowledge; mysterious. *noun* **1** (*the dark*) the absence of light in a place. [mass noun] nightfall. **2** a dark colour or shade, especially in a painting.

Oxford University Press 2005

My first investigation into lostness, outside my own head, took me to a woodland river that I know well, only unlike all my previous visits I went during the hours of darkness. Although darkness might seem like an odd choice as a means of examining lostness, I am now able to articulate, and perhaps substantiate, the valuable instinct that drove me there at that time.

The Czech philosopher Erazim Kohak (quoted in Macauley, 2009, p.66) describes darkness as a 'time of philosophising' which is expanded upon by David Macauley (2009, p.65) who observes that 'during the passage from evening to night...Introspection blossoms; mental acuity is sharpened; the senses are heightened and abandon their defences; mediation is made possible'. Likewise, I think of night time and the darkness that comes with the night, as an opportunity for deep thinking and reflection, a time for exploring the mind and as such recognise that darkness is a meditative space in which the potential within lostness might effectively be explored.

But our notion of darkness and the dark is far greater than purely a space for deep thinking as these dictionary definitions help to highlight:

(As per slide)

Now if the desire was to approach lostness with a sense of openness and possibility it seemed sensible to approach darkness and the night in a similar way. As such the decision was taken to put to one side the evil, wickedness and unhappiness, for now at least, and focus on literal darkness; the partial or total absence of light.

This decision was pertinent considering I was looking for something visible to work with in order to externalise the internal feelings of lostness through art making. Although darkness might seem an odd thing to discuss when talking about vision, we understand darkness as perceived by our senses, including sight. As Briggs Wright (2012, p.54) proposes 'darkness is a phenomenological rich failure of [this] visual awareness' and as Macauley (2009, p.72) suggests, although the night might be considered a negative or elemental absence it is this very absence that allows for possibility and discovery. And the same could be said for lostness, we might all too easily consider it a negative state however, it is within the absence of clarity that possibilities manifest.

## Getting out there: Creating art in the dark



GoPro camera and custom made boom arm,  
River Gelt, August 2014



Camera bag and rucksack,  
Tindale Tarn, February 2015



GoPro camera and foldable  
grabber arm, Beckfoot, July  
2015

- Work always undertaken in darkness
- Locations would be easy to navigate in the dark
- Always work in solitude
- Carry a standard set of equipment
- Head torch as only source of light

In order to evaluate whether literal darkness really could be integral to the exploration of lostness and my research question, it was essential that any theory be tested through practice. As an artist it was essential for me to physically immerse myself in darkness and find the space both mentally and physically in which lostness could be considered, contemplated, and most importantly, acted upon.

So as my initial instinct had suggested I continued setting out into the night and relative darkness of my home county Cumbria. As many will know Cumbria is a largely rural county which has areas that don't suffer too much light pollution, which then afford a decent chance of relative darkness.

In order to get the most from this darkness and the time that I had, I applied a set of rules to the three major projects that I undertook during my MA:

- The work would always be undertaken during the hours of darkness
- The locations would be easy to navigate in the dark – the locations chosen were within isolated places that I was either familiar with or were easy to learn to navigate in the dark. After all I wanted to maintain the distinction between lostness and lost so I always knew where I was; I was never physically lost.
- I would always work in solitude – The locations were places where I could be alone. Places that might help give rise to feelings of separation from the everyday which would allow me to focus on the state of lostness.
- I would always carried a standard set of equipment – Go-pro film camera, normal digital camera and sound recorder with which to make the work
- The only source of light would be a head torch –this was required in order to capture film which was a major part of (art) the output from the projects.

## From making to viewing: Installation Art

'There is always a reciprocal relationship of some kind between the viewer and the work, the work and the space, and the space and the viewer...In creating an installation, the artist treats an entire indoor space as a single situation...The spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work.'

Julie H. Reiss  
(1999, p. xiii)

'Installation art's multiple perspectives are seen to subvert the Renaissance perspective model because they deny the viewer any one ideal place from which to survey the work'

Claire Bishop  
(2005, p. 13)

'Installation...adheres to the fundamental definition of the postmodern art object as "neither exclusionary nor reductive, but synthetic, freely enlisting the full range of conditions, experiences, and knowledge beyond the object. Therefore, far from seeking a single and complete experience, the Post-Modern object strives toward an encyclopaedic condition, allowing a myriad of access points, infinitude of interpretive responses.'

Faye Ran quoting Howard Fox  
(2009, pp. 46-47)

Having considered the way the work was made it was then necessary to consider how the work was to be presented to an audience.

I consider myself to be an installation artist, having worked within this broad discipline for a long time, and see this as an important method within my practice. One of the key principles of Installation art, as set out by Julie Reiss (1999, p. xiii), is the reciprocal relationship between the work, viewer and the space in which the work is shown. There are various thoughts on how this relationship affects the viewer however, for me, one of the most important notions is that the viewer becomes integral to the completion of the work. Due to the multiple perspectives (Bishop, 2005, p.13) through which installation work can be approached this relationship allows for an open interpretation of the work (Faye Ran, 2009, pp.46-47). However, within the open interpretation it is still important to set some parameters so that the work is understood in relation to the ideas the artist is working with.

In the context of my work it was important that the themes of both lostness and darkness were carried right through the process: from the research, making, curation and experience of the work. Therefore, it was key that within my exhibitions darkness could be understood as a direct reference back to the literal darkness used to create the work, the darkness that was so integral to the investigation of lostness.

By its very nature, and its intrinsic relationship with space, installation could provide a setting in which darkness could be 'created' as part of exhibition experience. But how should this be tackled? We are all too accustomed to the 'black box' of the cinema or gallery used for showing film, where darkness is often nothing more than a means to an end to draw the viewer's attention to the screen. Bearing in mind most of the work being shown was film, darkness would need to be carefully managed if it was to be understood beyond this common experience and relate in any way to the exploration of lostness.

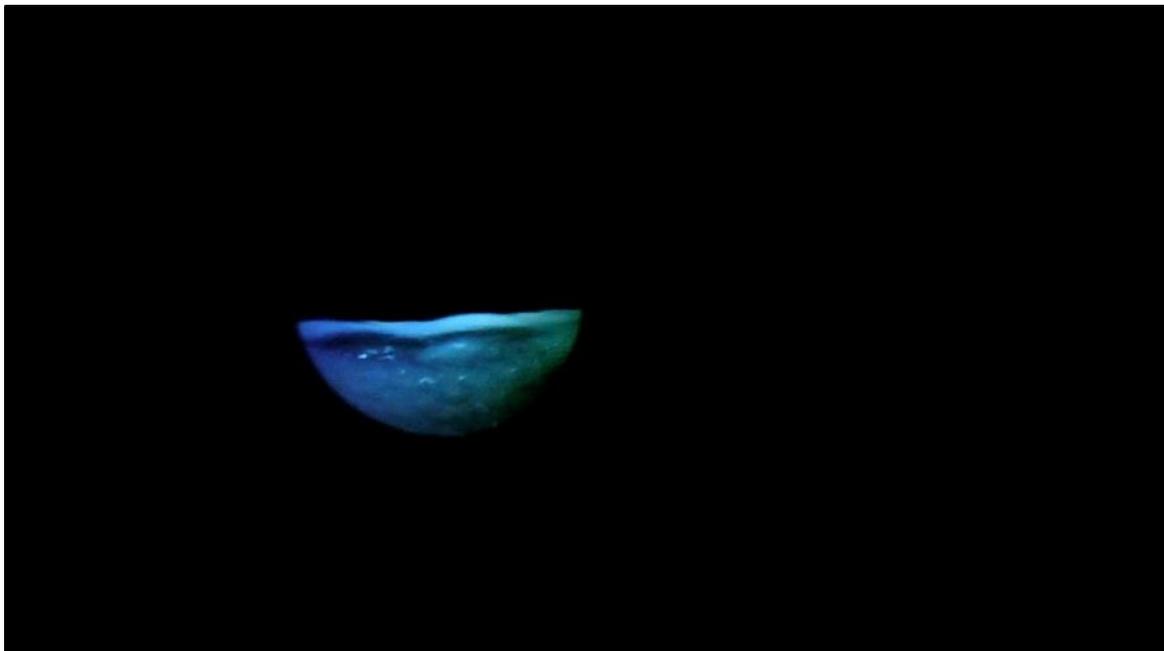


Therefore, if darkness was to be understood as integral to the work, it was self-evident that spaces that resembled 'black cubes' should be avoided, so I set out to find alternative exhibition spaces. For this presentation I'm going to use my most recent exhibition, *In the Presence of Darkness* (Sept 2015) as an example.

When seeking a building for the exhibition there were particular criteria that I sought in order to examine darkness within the exhibition context. Unit 12 at Warwick Mill Business Village, Warwick Bridge met this in a number of ways:

- The space did not resemble a traditional art gallery or cinema, therefore it provided an opportunity to create an experience of darkness outside of the realms of the 'black cube'
- On a practical level there were few windows and only one entrance to the unit which meant that it would be relatively easy to block out most of the natural light.
- The space was large enough that the viewers could be encouraged to walk around the space rather than taking a fixed seated position as is so often seen in 'black cube' spaces. In keeping with the overall approach to the themes of the work this helped promote a feeling of exploration and curiosity where the viewer could make their own choice about how to navigate the space and the work.

In addition a vestibule was built at the entrance to the unit, not only as a way of blocking out light, but also as a way of preventing the exhibition being seen from the outside. This acted as a transitional space, physically mirroring the passage into the cognitive landscape of the exhibition where lostness could be explored.



(Stills of documentary video of Warwick Mill exhibition)

## The inquisitive explorer: The light of the torch



Keyring torches given to the audience at *It matters to no one where we are* (Sept 2014) and later at *In the Presence of Darkness* (Sept 2015)

Apart from the work itself and the way both film and sound were curated, which I don't have time to go into now, there was one other important addition to the work. On entering the space viewers had the option of taking a small keyring torch to aid them in their exploration of the exhibition.

Within the research I have undertaken I have come across one theory that specifically mentions the use of darkness in installation art. Whilst I don't want to go into too much detail it is important to mention Claire Bishop's theory of Mimetic Engulfment as it had a significant influence on my decision to use torches.

## The inquisitive explorer: The light of the torch



'Rather than heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries, these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self...'

Claire Bishop  
(2005, p.82)



'A lantern or flashlight casting its rays into the night serves to illuminate a path but also separate and isolate us from the embracing dark, calling attention to our individualised and atomised selves.'

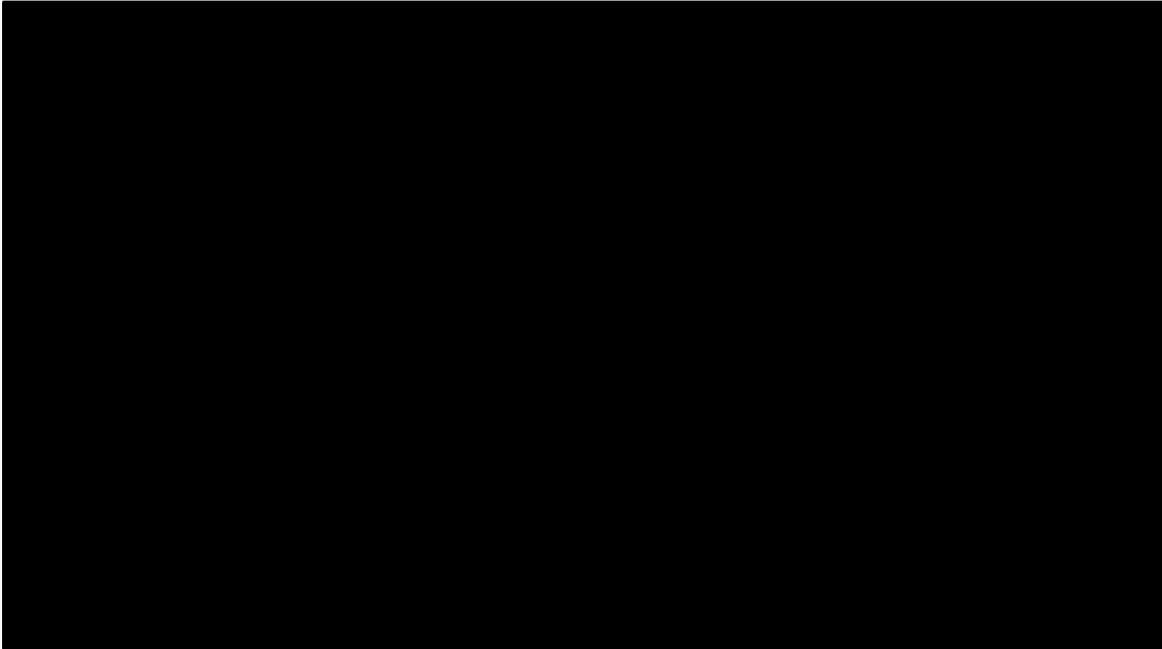
David Macauley  
(2009, p.64)

When discussing Mimetic Engulfment in relationship to darkness Bishop (2005, p.82) states that 'Rather than heightening awareness of our perceiving bodies and its physical boundaries, these dark installations suggest our dissolution; they seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self...'. Whilst this may be true this interpretation of darkness seemed counterproductive to an investigation that sought to explore a mental state, where the introspection and reflexive nature of self was essential.

As well as maintaining a relationship with self, there remained the desire to retain the distinction between lostness and lost. In order to do this I wanted to ensure that physical navigation of the space by viewers was possible without unnerving disorientation. There was simply no merit within my work to decentre (Bishop, 2005, p.82) the viewer by allowing the body and space to collide in darkness.

As stated by Macauley (2009, p.64) 'A lantern or flashlight casting its rays into the night serves to illuminate a path but also separate and isolate us from the embracing dark, calling attention to our individualised and atomised selves.' By introducing small narrow beams of low level light controlled by the viewer it was possible for darkness to be navigated whilst maintaining its engulfing, or perhaps embracing, nature. This balance between body and self helps reinforce that darkness is not simply an appropriate way to show film but is an essential part of the investigation of lostness.

It is also worth noting that this use of torches echoed the way in which I explored darkness whilst making the work, by head torch, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between the making of the work, the exhibiting of the work, and the theory behind it.



Although within this presentation there hasn't been time to show you the art outcomes of the work undertaken or provide any substantive conclusions what I hope I have demonstrated is a solid methodological foundation for my investigation of lostness. And it is by continuing to merge practice and research in this way that I will come closer to understanding my research question, and whether there is indeed constructive value in lostness.

**Images:**

Claire Bishop image available at:

<https://kbrijlall.wordpress.com/2012/03/21/the-social-turn-collaboration-and-its-discontents-claire-bishop/>

Accessed 7 July 2016.

David Macauley image available at:

<http://www.walkinginplace.org/converge/participants.htm#dmac>

Accessed 7 July 2016.

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