WAM Workshop, Institute of Physics, 19th April 2013

The 19th of April saw the very first of what might eventually become a regular fixture on the WAM SIG calendar: a workshop bringing together people from a variety of disciplines for a day of conjecture, experimentation, dialogue and general creative musing about. No expectations of any kind of result was laid on us participants, and the day was left wide open for the wildest flights of fancy and the most left-field research and art project suggestions. A pretty rare thing in our performance and result- obsessed world!

We all took a little while to get used to this kind of freedom - after all, most of us have to report efficiency gains and positive results and the most tax-payer friendly working practices in order to justify what we do. On that day, none of that mattered.

The purpose of the day was to start a conversation between our partner disciplines, and see where it might lead. It might result in viable inter-disciplinary research projects or new WAM festival content or nothing at all - there was no way of knowing. With such an experimental approach underlying our gathering, the Institute of Physics seemed a particularly apt venue in which to hold our workshop, and we took full advantage of the excellent facilities put at our disposal. Most importantly for a creative environment, the biscuits were first-rate!

Topics discussed included a project to investigate the health implications of weather patterns in parts of historic London - a fascinating study proposal put together by Joama Rahim and her team, which was to be combined with a sculpture inspired by the results of the investigation. We also explored the possibility of growing insecticides in the lab and transforming the results into an art installation (Pierrette Thomet and Stephen Burt), and were introduced to some of the Institute of Physics inter-disciplinary activities. Janet Barlow gave us a fascinating insight into the process of collaborating on The Breathing City, a project she developed in collaboration with artist and SIG member Holger Zöchenderlein. Informal discussions over a cup of coffee (and several of those delicious biscuits) considered the communicative possibilities inherent in a play about climate change. We explored the possibilities of creating a sonic art installation based on movement sensors which are linked to sound files of a weather event (Ikonik Sonik), and Julia Rogers led the group in a couple of thought-provoking art-based games.

Our very sociable and inspiring day came to a close with a tour of the Institute building, and a farewell pint in a nearby pub.

The next SIG meeting is not yet scheduled. Please look on the SIG page for updates or register your interest to attend directly with SIG Chair Pierrette Thomet at pierrette.thomet@googlemail.com, so that she can let you know when the date has been set.

Register an interest to join the SIG on the SIG webpage, or contact SIG Chair Pierrette Thomet at pierrette.thomet@googlemail.com with any questions or WAM-able project ideas you might have.
The WAM Art Feature
A look behind the scenes at art created for WAM

Robyn Appleton is currently a Fine Art PhD candidate at Reading University exploring the subject of conversation. In particular she asks questions about the act of listening: interior listening (or contemplation) and social listening, and their implications in the political arena. Just as conversations may expand into a surprising range of subjects, so too does this research as it links with Sociology, Political Analysis, Philosophy and Psychology. You can find out more about Robyn and see more of her work on her website: www.robynappleton.com

Looking up to something, 2012
(Sunglasses, bamboo canes, wire)
Reading Town Hall, 1-3 June 2012

The sky has always symbolized for me the extraordinary untamed power of nature. I grew up in Australia by the sea where I could watch the weather roll in across the ocean like a constantly changing canvas.

Taking part in WAMfest 2012 was a wonderful opportunity to combine a number of different elements from my art practice within the sculpture Looking up to something: a sense of wonder about nature’s beauty, power and complexity; the urgency for humanity to contemplate what is happening to our natural environment; placing the art outside of the building, rather than in a gallery space, to be closer to the elements; creating the sculpture with sunglasses, something that so many music festival-goers wear, hoping for sunshine as they listen to their favourite music.

The sculpture was devised so that it became two different structures over the weekend of the festival: firstly, the sunglasses were attached to 3m long sticks, forming a small crowd which looked up, mimicking what people would be doing over the WAMfest weekend: coming together to enjoy music, art and science. On the second day, the sunglasses rested on wires, mimicking a flock of butterflies, reminding us of the link between butterfly populations and climate change.

Climate Scientist and WAM Special Correspondent Dr Peter Stott is the Scientific Strategic Head at the Met Office responsible for Climate Monitoring and Attribution. He has been a lead author and Convening Lead Author for the 4th and 5th Assessment Reports of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change respectively. In his spare time he also dabbles in writing and is currently working on a play. Here he reports from the 2013 AGU meeting in San Francisco.

The American Geophysical Union fall meeting is one of the main conferences in the field of geosciences, held every year in San Francisco shortly before Christmas. It takes place in a huge underground conference centre, just a short walk from downtown. Over 22,000 people attend. At any one moment there can be thirty or forty sessions going on in parallel.

When I arrived at the front door last December, it all seemed rather overwhelming. I found myself trying to decide whether it would be better to attend an interesting sounding oral session on a subject of rather peripheral relevance or go find my session’s posters and quiz the doctoral students eagerly waiting by their work. And as I flicked through the day’s encyclopaedic programme of events more options presented themselves.

Having to plump for something that was going to mean I would miss a host of other possibilities began to seem rather exhausting. So on a whim I snuck in through the set of double doors immediately in front of me and sat down at the back of the darkened room. The scene at first sight seemed like a typical one at this mega conference. There was a cavernous hall with multiple rows of sparsely populated identical seats facing a large screen and in the distance a raised lectern from which a speaker was addressing her audience.

But as I gradually tuned in to what I was seeing and hearing I realised this was not a typical oral session. I wasn’t listening to scientists describing their research. Instead, I was hearing from practicing artists describing their work interpreting geoscience through the lens of art.

One artist described an installation in a suburban American setting of a structure of coloured plastic strips that rose and fell as the river beneath rose and fell with the seasons and the weather. Another told the story of a garden that mapped out the local geology in growing plants. And a third presentation provided a perspective on how scientists engage with the arts.

It turns out that professional scientists are far more likely to practice the arts - play a musical instrument, write poetry, paint landscapes - than the general population. And interestingly, the more senior the cohort of scientists surveyed, the higher the percentage who are engaged in the creative arts alongside their successful professional career. Not surprising perhaps when you think about it, being creative in the sciences is a good predictor of being creative in the arts.

Later, I wandered out of the hall and up into the California sunshine mentally invigorated by this illuminating session so serendipitously found. Artists are doing fascinating things re-interpreting scientific data and the natural world. Scientists, although many of them may be keeping quiet about it, are getting creative artistically. This is why we created WAM to rub these two worlds up against each other, make some sparks, as we did at the inaugural WAM festival in Reading in 2012. And, as was illustrated by the presentations at the American Geophysical Union’s Fall Conference, there is no shortage of avenues to be explored.

Follow Peter’s blog on WAM and climate change at http://wamfestival.wordpress.com