

A Leap into the Dark

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker



CONTENTS

3	300 WORD STATEMENT
4-5	RESEARCH QUESTION
6-11	OUTPUTS
12-15	OVERVIEW
12	PROJECT TIMELINE
13-15	METHODS OF CREATING A LEAP INTO THE DARK
16-21	CONTEXTUAL INFORMATION
16	CONTEXT - PRIOR RESEARCH
17-19	OUTCOMES OF RESEARCH – RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH
21	CRITICAL CONTEXT
22	EXAMPLE OF AUDIENCE RESPONSE

STATEMENT

A Leap into the Dark (2020) is both (a) standalone film-work online, and (b) a multi-media installation by artist duo Walker and Bromwich, exhibited presented by Queens Park Railway Club, an independent artist run gallery space in Glasgow (7 March – 20 Sept 2020).

A Leap into the Dark extends Walker & Bromwich's interest in combining sculpture, performance and socially engaged art practice. A highly personal work that deploys practice-led methodologies developed over an extended practice within a new framing, the project explored how art has agency to shape ideas, be meaningful and release potential within peoples' lives using speech, fairy-tales and nursery rhymes.

Focussing on, and working with Walker's 88-year-old mother Libby Walker, who suffers from dementia, the research took a personal approach to participation. This required carefully navigating the ethical and personal challenges of balancing the benefits and risks of working with a loved and vulnerable parent within socially engaged participatory practice, filmmaking and portraiture.

The work consisted of two elements: (a) video in which Libby Walker performs the seemingly simple act of remembering and reciting the childhood nursery rhyme 'I know an old lady who swallowed a spider' and (b) gallery installation, film-work and inflatable sculpture. The two elements act in opposition to one another, creating a potent and emotionally charged, liminal space.

Alongside its central themes of memory and ageing, expressed both through the remembering of the verse and as the camera traverses the arc of life suggested by the objects within the physical installation.

Due to Covid-19 pandemic, the work was launched twice: physically on the 7 March for one night only, then 22 August to 20 September, Secondly the digital video launched online from 1 May. It was notable that the timing, intimacy and reach of the online release prompted a strong audience response. At a time when humanity was forced to slow down and reflect on planetary and personal mortality; the research seemed to resonate with audiences' thoughts on the strange and magical fragility of life.

RESEARCH QUESTION

Can the poetics of filmmaking and art practice help to navigate the sensitive terrain of old age and illness and find a language for a state of being that cannot be described adequately through words: an undefined territory, the space between life and death, remembering and forgetting, between realities, between worlds.

CONTEXT *A Leap into the Dark* was commissioned and exhibited by Queens Park Railway Club, an independent artist run gallery space in Glasgow. (March – Sept 2020). The research was disseminated in two forms: online as a standalone film; and a multi-media gallery installation (film, sculpture, sound-work, lighting). The work was made with Zoe Walker's 88-year-old mother, Libby Walker, who suffers from dementia. Filmed in her home in Arrochar, Scotland, the research took a personal approach to participation. This required carefully navigating the ethical and personal challenges of balancing the benefits and risks of working with a loved and vulnerable parent within socially engaged participatory practice, filmmaking and portraiture.

AIMS To deploy practice-led methodologies developed over an extended practice, within a new framing in order to speak about things we cannot find language for. The research explores perception of the world as the body and

mind changes through aging and dementia. The research also aims to explore how a person with dementia can have greater voice and agency.

THE PROJECT Combining sculpture, video, performance and socially engaged art practice the work extends Walker & Bromwich's practice led research into the agency of the artwork in transforming understanding of site and situation and the world. The work consisted of two formats: The standalone Film and the gallery installation, including the film-work and inflatable planet/ball like sculpture.

THE FILM (5mins 57seconds) '*A Leap into the Dark* in which Libby Walker performs the seemingly simple act of remembering and reciting the childhood nursery rhyme verse 'I know an old lady who swallowed a spider' uses the poetics of filmmaking to explore the slippage between real and imagined, shifting between time and space. As the camera traverses the objects within her room, suggesting the arc of life. The film operates through an emotional register, connecting to universal female archetypes in myth and legend that transport us to an 'other worldly' space within which we are drawn between celebrating and mourning, embracing life and death. In doing so, this work gives voice to, and empowers, the subject.

RESEARCH QUESTION (CONT.)

THE GALLERY INSTALLATION (Film and Sculpture) add physicality to the film extending the 'in-betweenness' of the film-work into a physical space with the particular use of theatrical lighting, a soundtrack and an oversized misshapen inflatable sculptural that filled the second gallery. Its dark surface suggesting the unknown elements within, and crater like holes puncturing its round planetary skin presses out towards the viewer shifting their sense of scale. As the eye traverse the sculpture, it echoes the film's big close-up tracking shots of delicate worn furniture and adds new dimensions to the film's central themes of time, memory and ageing, expressed through the remembering of the verse and, as the camera traverses the objects within Libby's room, suggesting the arc of life.

INSIGHTS - The dominant perception of old age and dementia is of a person slowly losing their memory and dying. The subject is seen as a tragic person without agency. However, these preconceptions are challenged through watching the film-work. As Libby recites the verse, at times she loses the tread and forgets lines, she laughs, she commands the space, breaking the Fourth Wall, she makes knowing bows to camera to conclude the story; she still has power and agency to guide the viewer in a shared exchange.

This is a kind of shamanistic journey, time-travelling between worlds, slipping between memory and forgetting. These are things that are not readily understood by our society – tribal communities understand these different spaces as spiritual realm. However, within the film, Libby shifts between two worlds, in an inexplicable and joyful way, without fear, at a point at which she seems in tune with these forces.

OUTPUTS

Leap into the Dark

Link to *Leap Into the Dark* film at Queens Park Railway Club

[http://www.queensparkrailwayclub.co.uk/
WalkerandBromwich.html](http://www.queensparkrailwayclub.co.uk/WalkerandBromwich.html)

<https://vimeo.com/413953775>

Exhibition

Gallery installation, Queens Park Railway Club
7 March – 20 Sept 20



Still from 'A Leap into the Dark' (2021) filmed in location in Libby Walkers home in Arrochar, Argyll and Bute, Scotland

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*



Still from 'A Leap into the Dark' (2021)

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*

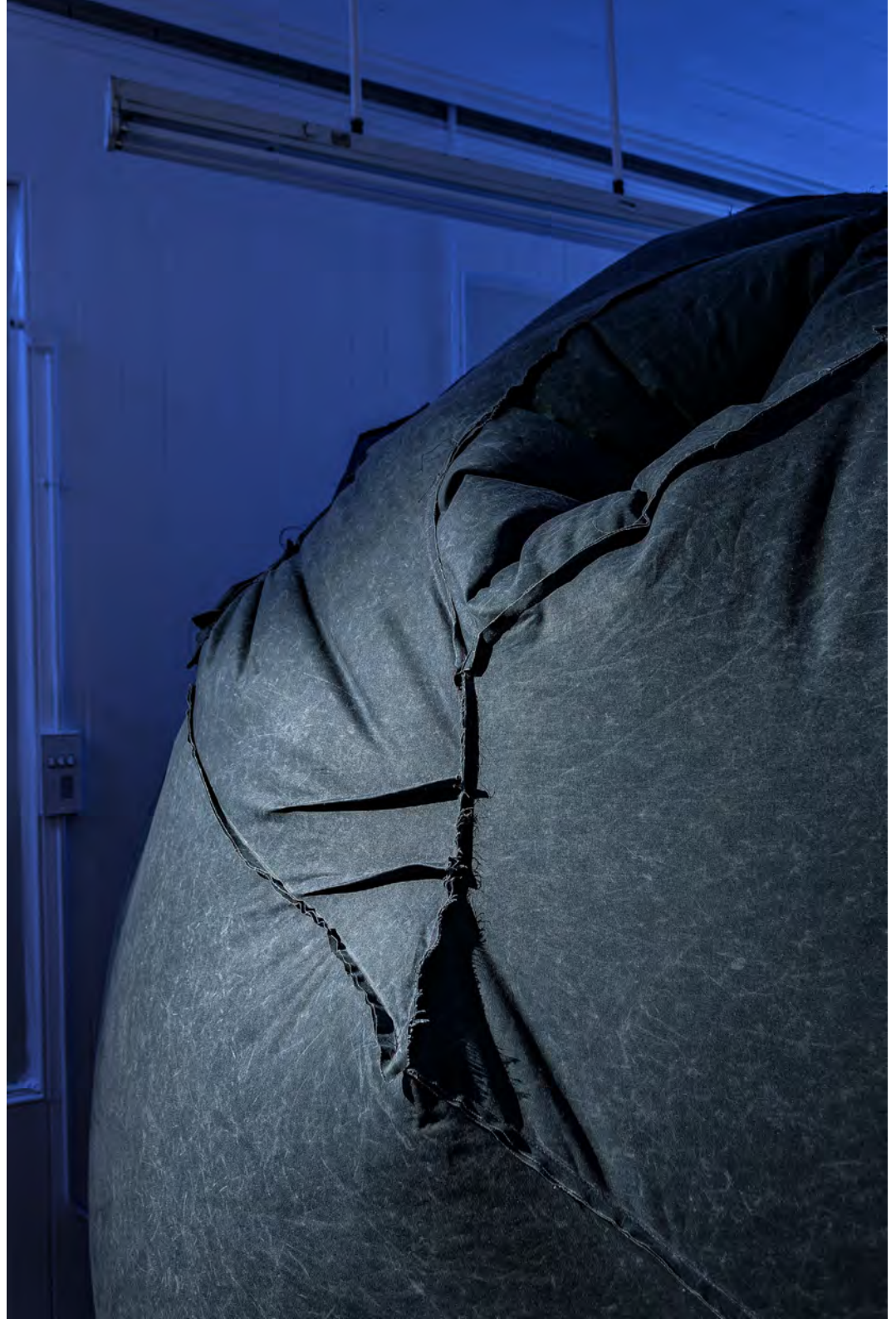
Gallery Installation Space 2 –
Inflatable Sculpture

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*



Inflatable Sculpture, detail

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*





Left: Gallery 1 Video screening Right: Gallery 2 Sculpture (detail)

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*

Aug 2018

Invitation Gallery commission

Nov 19 to Jan 20

Pre-production

Planning, booking cameraman, costume making,
commissioning soundtrack

8-10 Feb 20

Production

Filming and stills

12 Feb – 6 Mar 20

Post-Production

Editing

Gallery Installation

7 March – 20 Sept 20

Exhibition and Dissemination

Queens Park Railway Club

07 Mar

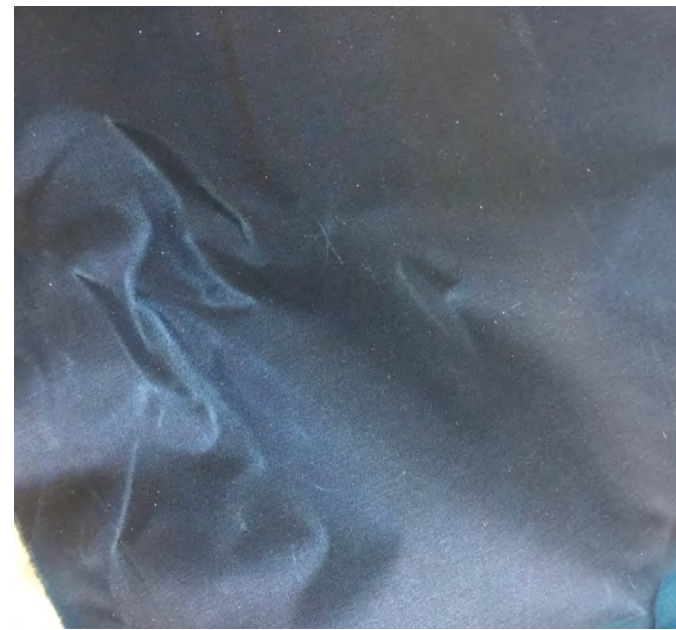
Opening physical gallery exhibition
(one night only due to Covid)

01 May

Online film release Vimeo

22 Aug – 20 Sept

Restricted reopening of physical gallery exhibition
(due to Covid)



Materials and making process – Walker & Bromwich studio Jan 2020

Neil Bromwich & Zöe Walker *A Leap into the Dark*

**NOTE: Film is a standalone work. The Gallery exhibition is a standalone work, extending the film-work to become an immersive installation. Each can be viewed individually as the work Leap into the Dark*

- **Process** – PRACTICALLY these aims were achieved through meeting these objectives:
- ***A Leap into the Dark: Sculpture*** – was constructed in a heavy weight waxed cotton selected for its structure, weight, density and surface texture - once crumpled the fabric surface discolours and breaks into a web of white lines reminiscent of skin or landscape features. The sculpture was inflated by a constant air fan from a pipe in the bottom. Machine stitched seams were left of the outside to accentuate the structure leaving small cut treads visible. The shift from larger object to these small surface details heightens a sense of scale to the viewer, like observing an object a long way away through a powerful telescope or something very small viewed through a microscope.

- ***A Leap into the Dark: Performance*** - During the performance, Libby is dressed as an Owl, a special and symbolic animal for her. She recites the nursery rhyme 'There was an old lady that swallowed a fly', a favourite and often recited poem, that was identified by Walker as a good subject and structure for the film. The costumes where handmade by Walker & Bromwich they reference characters in classic children's storybooks, fancy dressing up games as well as the shamanic notion of having a 'spirit animal'. An idea that draws its origins from ancient animistic and totemistic beliefs about the world and our connection to it. Alongside Libby, her daughter Zöe Walker, appears dressed as a snail; the two mirror each others' movements, in an unscripted moment that was spontaneously improvised by the two family members.

- **A Leap into the Dark: Film** - The final film shoot was completed in 8 February, 2020. A test video shoot by Walker & Bromwich happened in 4 weeks beforehand and stills photography by Colin Gray happened 2 weeks later. This series of test shoots helped resolve issues such as styling and lighting. Importantly it also served as a rehearsal for the performance and a foundation for decisions around Libby being happy and comfortable with a film process in her home. For the final shoot: camera operators, Henry Coombes and Lianne Hopper, worked with Walker & Bromwich to construct the visual style of the film. It was shot working with lighting and a Black Magic camera. Bromwich directed camera action and prompted poem lines. Walker directed the set, costumes, styling and coached performances. There were 5 takes of the poem: the best single take was then used unedited as the spine of the short film, the only camera movement being a very slow digital zoom applied in post-production for the duration of the verse. Ornaments, objects, plants and furniture was also filmed to portray the interior world. Edit was by Geri Toth, a freelance editor who Walker & Bromwich have worked with previously.
- **A Leap into the Dark: Sound-work** - Walker and Bromwich approached and commissioned Gayle Brogan of Barrett's Dotted Beauty to compose an original soundtrack for the film, following them meeting at a performance at the CCA Glasgow. Gayle describes herself as "Ayrshire-based creator of slowly-unfolding, ritualistic hymnals that draw heavily on the landscape and natural world". This sensibility chimed with the aims of the research project. The resulting sound-work found the mood and spatial elements that Walker and Bromwich felt complemented the aim of the film-work
- **A Leap into the Dark: Gallery Exhibition Design** - Queens Park Railway Club is a small gallery venue, housed in a former waiting room on Queens Park Railway Station, on the Southside of Glasgow. It consists of two, simple, interconnecting gallery spaces. This was considered a ideal setting for the binary 'other' worldly themes explored in the work. The Gallery was blacked out, not only to better stage the video work but also to allow for theatrical blue lighting for the sculpture space.

Themes – theatrical, cinematic, childhood story, storytelling, acting, other-worlds, between worlds, mythic

This practice-based research draws upon different strands of Walker and Bromwich's artistic research practice to focus their research into more personal participatory enquiry

This research project is set within the context of Walker and Bromwich's practice-based research of over 20 years, that has in the last decade been focused on large scale participatory public artworks that explore ideas of a particular site, situation or community. Outcomes of these previous projects have often been presented outdoor in the form of temporary sculptural interventions, public processions and performances. Projects such as: *Celestial Radio* – a mirrored sailing boat broadcasting a radio station; *Workers Maypole* - a sculptural intervention wrapping Grey's Monument in Newcastle; *Slate or State* - a community-built, inflatable monument to slate mining; and, *Dragon of Public and Private Ownership* - a public procession and folk-play to overthrow capitalism.

Increased care duties with Walker's mother have resulted in a shift in the context of situation and community to facilitate a refocusing of a new site for their creative research practice. The dramatic shift from participatory projects working in the public realm with large groups to engaging with the domestic realm on a one-to-one basis with a family member means that *A Leap into the Dark* is a marked step change in their practice.

Notably, this domestic site of research resonates with changes that have been enforced on society and as individuals due to the Covid-19 restrictions. Suddenly, we are all living in our own little worlds that at times are intense, dramatic & repetitive. Our attention is drawn to the details and objects within our home and we have more time to remember. *A Leap into the Dark* opens up a new territory for the Bromwich's joint research

More information of previous works www.walkerandbromwich.org.uk

RESEARCH INSIGHTS

This focus from participatory group projects with groups of people to working with just one person. Zöe's mum has allowed us to simplify and focus our research themes and methods to far greater depth. Within the practice we've always sought to find special unique narratives and stories that are found in a particular site that can then be basis for an artwork that amplifies and extends these ideas out into the world. We explore these ideas through a particular lens and language that incorporates - play, dressing-up, masquerade, acting out and storytelling and prefiguration. Donning a mask or costume can empower the subject(s) to explore ideas that sit between documentary and fiction, feelings, dreams, stories that shape and give meaning to the world. (Neil Bromwich)

In terms of media, *A Leap into the Dark* has facilitated a greater engagement with the cinematic, and film-making elements of 'magic realist' that were foregrounded in the earlier work. The act of making a cinematic image or 'moment' became the foundation for bigger participatory

projects. This approach reshaped the role of the participant within a social artwork, to become actor within a kind of epic filmic vision. Although this cinematic approach was drawn into our participatory practice methods, the detail and craft of film making became less possible on a larger scale due to the demands of working with larger groups of volunteers. However, *A Leap into the Dark* successfully reincorporates the socially engaged approach into a smaller film-making structure that allows a greater focus on the craft detail of filming

A Leap into the Dark employs many of the methods used in our previous projects - recording story telling (*Celestial Radio*); costume & performance (*Dragon of Public and Private Ownership*), significant inflatable sculpture (*Slate or State*) - *A Leap into the Dark* has allowed us to reflect on a more personal approach to participatory practice and foregrounding film processes and personal actions, again within the research.

The research demonstrated the artistic value of simplifying and streamlining the means of production. Scaling down from large complex projects with lots of moving parts and participants to focus in on one participant provided the opportunity to get to the essence of a research idea and engage with a subject on a deeper level. Furthermore, working with a family member gave rise to greater opportunity to connect and make a work informed by years of prior knowledge and understanding.

In many ways this work is a ready-made. The performance is a nursery rhyme poem that has been performed regularly in the car journeys or as a party piece performed by Libby Walker, Zöe Walker and Neil Bromwich. The artists' intervention here has been to amplify and to distil the essence of that performance, thereby adding to Walker and Bromwich's research interests in oral histories, stories, archetypes and mythologies.

Something about the power and universality of nursery rhymes being part of the larger consciousness, something that's been shaped by being passed on by word of mouth from generations to generations and has no one author; that gives it a kind of otherworldly, mythic power that resonates with human unconscious though in a kind of linguistic archaeology.

The film-work itself refocuses Walker and Bromwich's research interest in film as a personal magical space. Walker and Bromwich's research often employs metaphors and illusions to explore the life's dreams and aspiration. They have explored though their fascination of ideas of theatre, magic lantern shows and early cinema such as 'A Trip to the Moon' (1902) by Georges Méliès and the kind of handmade make-believe world that that can reveal something about the real world in which we live in.

The research demonstrated the potential of older people effected by dementia to continue to participate and contribute in creativity to a high level within a critical context of a contemporary gallery setting as well as have a greater voice within society.

The research project celebrates and enables Libby In western science terminology she is 'suffering from dementia', but in the filmwork she is not a passive subject, she is an 'actor', one who acts though her delivery of this role within the film and in society. Although Libby cannot remember performing in the film, she enjoys watching it back, she finds it hilarious, she laughs at herself, she likes the film and the image of herself in the film.

The research work has resonated with audiences and has raised questions (see example email, below). Through experiencing the artwork/research, film/gallery audiences start to re-address their understanding of the world around them such as:, what is happening as a person slips from this world to another world, do they have a different understanding of the world around them, how is perception changed through dementia?

The work has been discussed as part of:

Possible Dialogues International Research Group as part of Walker & Bromwich's presentation about engagement approaches to working with individuals and older community members.

Possible Dialogues is an initiative to connect community leaders, activists, artists and academics in Colombia and Scotland who have common interests but have not had the opportunity to interact in the same space, time or for the same purposes. 'Possible Dialogues' generates critical thinking through art and is developing a collective practice-based research project for Cop26 (Nov 2021) and Documenta 15 (2022). 'Possible Dialogues' research aims to give voice to, and build connects between indigenous communities in Colombian Amazon and communities in Scotland around the climate crisis.

'Possible Dialogues' international research Group they jointly set up with by Walker and Bromwich with Más Arte Más Acción and OPIAC in Columbia in 2019. Partners include Universidad de los Andes, Bogotá, Columbia; Más Arte Más Acción cultural foundation Columbia; OPIAC, Organization of Indigenous Peoples of the Colombian Amazon; ÚNA arts and ecological foundation Scotland/Columbia; CCA Glasgow, Royal Botanic Gardens Edinburgh, Stop Climate Chaos Scotland, Feminist Exchange Network Glasgow, Edinburgh University, Glasgow School of Art and Newcastle University

Example of audience response (by email)

From: sam ainsley

Subject: from Sam (Ainsley)

Date: 7 September 2020 at 20:07:13 BST

Hello Zoe and Neil, I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed your work at Queens Park, I sat through the film a few times and became mesmerised by the woman I subsequently discovered is your mother Zoe? In the early stages of Alzheimers? How amazing is she?

There were so many allusions that came to my mind seeing the film and the sculpture;

Angela Carter's reimagined "fairy tales"

Alice in Wonderland

Jorge Luis Borges (and other South American) 'Magic Realists'

the films of Maya Deren

Also the repetition is so important as you think about the song/nursery rhyme and it's metaphorical implications in today's world of dog eat dog...

The "other worldliness" of the sculpture was striking; you cannot enter but feel there must be an "inside" or something hidden?

This work has given me food for thought and is an example of the complexity of meaning (but simplicity of form) that the best artworks often have. Douglas Gordon once told me that an artwork is successful if it is talked about long after the act of viewing and also stays in the mind of the viewer. This exhibition did it for me.

All best as ever SamXX