

# The Human Limpet Project: Where Humans and Limpets Meet

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ABSTRACT

The story of limpets, those conical sea-snails frequently found on rocky shorelines may seem inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but that is not the case. If given careful, prolonged attention, room to express themselves and an engaged receptive audience they reveal a richly entangled human-nonhuman story which unfolds over thousands of years. A process of art-based research, underpinned by new materialist thinking and practice channels this attentiveness, provides physical room, makes space for creative inquiry, corresponds with humans and nonhumans, and generates a willing audience with enchanting, potentially life affirming consequences.



## Introduction

In this visual essay I introduce *The Human Limpet Project*, an in-progress art-based doctoral research project investigating the entangled relationship between humans, limpets and the environment over time. I focus on two stories that are unfolding simultaneously; the first story recounts how the methodology and a conceptual framework, underpinned by a new materialist approach have been developed and applied *through* practice and the other begins to tell of limpets and the wondrous story lines that are emerging from this process.

The project began following a visit to an archaeological excavation at Skaill Farm, a Norse settlement on the west coast of Rousay, Orkney in 2018. One of the archeologists working there gave me a handful of limpet shells that had been unearthed from shell rich midden as a souvenir. This small act of generosity triggered an enduring interest in our relationship with these

familiar but often underappreciated marine snails, commonly found around the rocky shorelines of the British Isles and further afield.

Archaeology often inspires my interdisciplinary work. I do not have one main or dominant field of practice, instead I bring together and interconnect various artistic practices including drawing, painting, textiles, collection, assemblage, installation, video and participatory activities such as letter writing, social gatherings and conversation.

My practice, as a visual and socially engaged artist habitually involves collecting. No matter what the project's topic or theme, the research almost always starts with the amassment of related objects and books. This process of gathering centers my mind on the subject in hand, brings into focus the infinite variety within one (life)form and provides art making material.

Prompted by the gift of Viking age limpets, I set to collecting and drawing more limpet shells as a way of *coming-to-know* and *becoming-acquainted-with*. Small wooden boxes were used to contain the collected shells and convey them from the beach to my studio. They were then stored, loosely organized by date and place of collection on my shelves. The assembled shells housed in their various jumble of boxes began to remind me of a cabinet of curiosities. Also known as a *Wunderkammer* or wonder-chamber this form of pre-Enlightenment museum became my inspiration and eventually my art medium of choice leading to the creation of *The Limpetarium*, a limpet focused, contemporary *Wunderkammer*.

As I began to talk publicly about this early stage of my research and show visitors around my studio, interest in my limpet 'obsession', as it was often described began to grow. Frequently referring to me as 'Limpet-Woman' other people repeatedly asked why I



was bothering to spend so much mis-directed (in their view) time and effort focused on such an ordinary, insignificant thing whilst at the same time expressing a desire to know more.

Motivated by what appeared to be both an inability to understand, but also a curiosity in my deep limpet interest, which seemed to reflect the widespread view of contemporary life as alienating, cynical, lacking in surprise and “wonder-disabled” (Bennett, 2001, p. 4) I began working on a more structured research proposal. It’s aims are threefold: first to enroll limpets and people in a creative process which questions the habitual ways by which we know and conduct ourselves towards a seemingly uninteresting, irrelevant nonhuman organism and, by extension the rest of the wider natural world. Second, to stimulate an original form of public dialogue regarding the little-known historical, cultural, and ecological value of limpets and the ecosystems within which they live.

And third to engender a sense of curiosity, wonder and enchantment within a wide audience through the affective power of the *Wunderkammer*, considering if and how this “enchantment effect” (Bennett, 2001, p. 10) changes our relationship with the more-than-human world.

### Conceptual Assemblage

The story of limpets, those conical creatures frequently found on rocky shores is usually told through taxonomy. Within the Mollusca phylum, which includes over 100,000 recognized invertebrate species, limpets are more specifically classified as marine gastropods, a type of single shelled sea-snail (Hatcher & Trehwella, 2019, p. 75). They may seem inconsequential in the grand scheme of things, but this is not the case. I am finding that if given careful, prolonged attention, room to express themselves and an engaged, receptive audience they

reveal a different, richly entangled, potentially transformative story which unfolds over many thousands of years.

A process of art-based research brings about and channels this attentiveness, provides physical room, makes space for creative inquiry, corresponds with humans and nonhumans, and generates a willing, participative audience, extending and enlivening the taxonomical tale.

A complex lexicon of subtly different terms has been developed by practitioners over the past few decades which describe artistic forms of research (Chilton & Leavy, 2014). The attempts to continually label this work has, however created confusion and difficulty synthesizing the work being done. The term ‘art-based research’ is therefore intended as an umbrella, overarching category which encompasses all processes of knowledge building through the creative arts in research contexts (Leavy, 2018, p. 4).



As an experimental, reflexive, trans-disciplinary process of practitioner research, participatory action research and practical making, art-based research methodology is necessarily emergent being subjected to repeated questioning and adjustment, rather than remaining fixed throughout the process of inquiry. Art-based research provides a freedom of inquiry, responding to particular questions or issues across disciplines, dissolving disciplinary boundaries thereby offering new ways of knowing and communicating (McNiff, 2018, p. 24).

*The Human Limpet Project* research is underpinned by the new materialist concept of assemblage. New materialism has emerged over the past thirty or so years and as an approach is broadly concerned with rethinking and reimagining our philosophical beliefs about materiality. New materialists are abandoning previously held dominant views of matter as an inert, 'dead' substance subject to predictable causal forces. Instead, matter is considered to

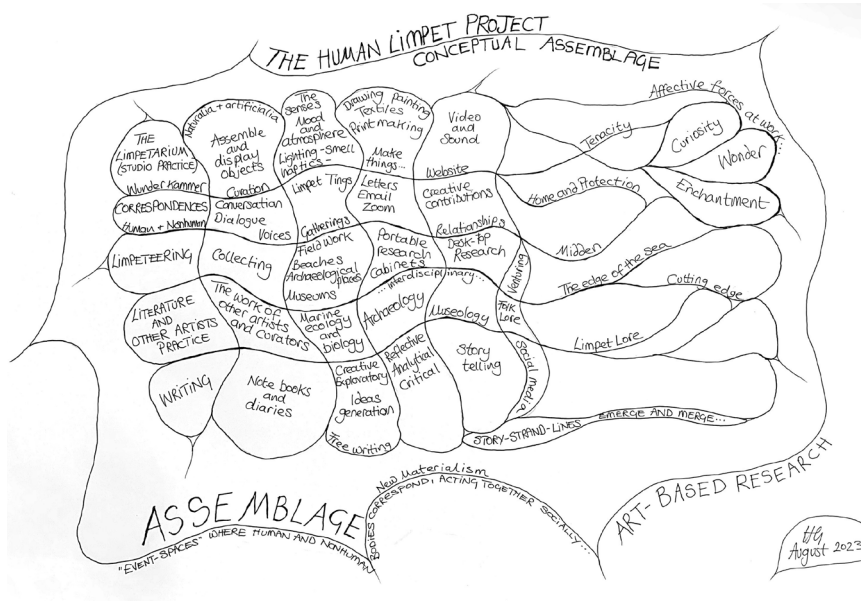
have vitality and a capacity for agency which is self-creative, productive, and unpredictable. (Coole & Frost, 2010).

Questioning the long-standing anthropocentric view that humans are the makers of the world, and that the world is a passive resource for human endeavors, new materialism de-centers human agency, and in so doing crosses a range of social theory divides including nature-culture, human-nonhuman, animate-inanimate. Such oppositional ways of thinking are shunned, and processes of materialization are emphasized as relational networks or assemblages of animate and inanimate matter (Fox & Alldred, 2015).

From a new materialist perspective, assemblages are characterized as 'event-spaces' where human and nonhuman bodies correspond, acting together socially, continuously affecting, and being affected by the other. They are ad hoc groupings, 'throbbing confederations' of diverse elements that work together to make things

happen. Assemblages are not governed by any central head, and no one type of material on its own determines the shape or course of the group. The effects generated by an assemblage emerge as each of the 'member-actants' cross paths, some crossing more frequently or more powerfully than others (Bennett, 2010).

*The Human Limpet Project* as a whole is viewed as a 'research-assemblage', comprised of the events, instruments and researchers involved. Assemblage thinking and practice opens up all of the intertwining research elements, all the human and nonhuman materials that constitute the study, their affective flows and capacities for action and interaction (Fox & Alldred, 2015). *The Human Limpet Project* in this way is regarded as a league of art practices, methodologies, literary references, other artists' influences, physical and digital spaces, journeys made, places visited, sensations, memories, connected establishments, participant



exchanges and contributions, ethical principles, funding, supervisor and reviewer input, the researcher herself and of course limpets.

### Methodological Assemblages

Three methodological elements comprise the research: *Wunderkammer*, *Correspondences* and *Limpeteering* and each are also regarded as an assemblage.

*The Limpetarium*, a contemporary limpet-focused *wunderkammer* is an assemblage defined by its hybrid exhibition-art-studio-space, which serves as a collection, work of art, social space, private workplace, and place of research.

Through assemblage thinking and practice, *The Limpetarium* is considered as a coming together of its various parts, its spatial and temporal location, physical dimensions, furnishings, lighting, sounds, smell,

atmosphere, and visitor engagements, as well as its objects and artworks. All play a part in its making, affects and impact although not necessarily consistently, equally or evenly.

The dissolved distinctions between animate-inanimate and nature-culture that occur within assemblages correspond directly with the contemporary *Wunderkammer*. In *The Limpetarium*, myriad natural and human-made limpet things are assembled, displayed and often melded together in a fluid, unfixed, somewhat unsettling space, creating curiously new combinations and wondrously entangled formations.

*Correspondences* is a term borrowed from anthropologist Tim Ingold and his book of the same name. Within *The Human Limpet Project*, it describes an assemblage of human and more-than-human participants and their entangled social relations. These enmeshed connections are created through a series of conversations, gatherings and exchanges

within my studio, virtually, by post and at various limpety places such as beaches and archaeological sites. *Correspondences* are concerned with the ‘in-between-ness’ of human and nonhuman beings, the process of their joining and mingling, and their emergent dialogues and stories (Ingold, 2021, p. 9).

*Correspondences* are a form of social art practice. Known variously as socially engaged, participatory, collaborative, or dialogic art practices, each with a nuanced definition social art involves “the creative orchestration of collaborative encounters and conversations well beyond the institutional confines of the gallery or museum” (Kester, 2013, p. 1). Social art practice is dependent on the involvement of others and actively invites and intentionally brings in multiple perspectives (Helguera, 2011, p. 2). Through an assemblage approach, *Correspondences* extends this invitation to the nonhuman, including



and joining with limpets, their shell remains and coastal abodes.

*Limpeteering* is the practice of limpet-orienting. It is an assemblage of field-based, way-finding activities where limpets act as a navigational aid and lead the way. Their zig zag tracks impel us towards archaeological, historical, ecological, and scholarly places and people with limpet-related information, experience, know-how and enthusiasm. Through the movement of ideas, bodies and material via *Portable Research Cabinets*, places and matter merge, coastal and inland flex together and timelines knot. Distant moments, memories and events re-materialize through the cabinets which serve as portals, sometimes flashing quickly into and out of existence, and at other times lingeringly transporting us away in slow motion.

These multiple, intricately interwoven conceptual assemblages are

produced *through* practice and are fluid, dynamic and flexible, subject to complex experimental, material, and social processes and a “tapping into the not-yet-known” (Davies, 2021, p. 35).

I am looking to de-center myself within these processes, to being open to human-nonhuman collectivities, unpicking the forces at play and watching out for new ways of understanding and knowing. Close examination of the “flows and conjunctions” that emerge from human-limpet assemblages will provide an inside view, making *The Human Limpet Project* practices visible, hearable and tangible (Davies, 2021, p. 7).

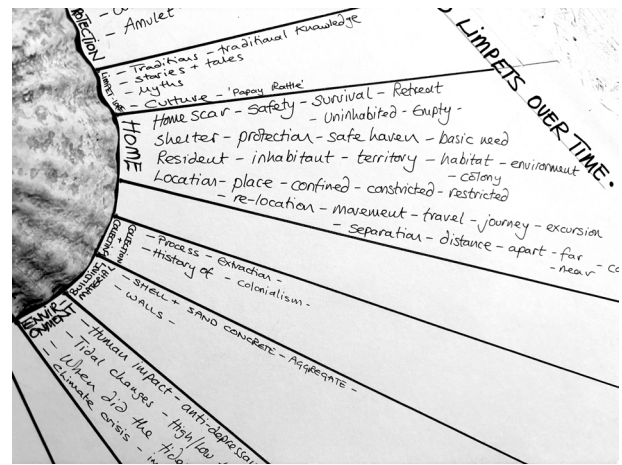
Following Tim Ingold (2021, p. 8) I approach this investigation from an ontogenic perspective, tracing how the project, as an organism is generated, its growth, formation, movement, and responses throughout its lifespan.

## Emerging Storylines

The methodological elements of *Wunderkammer*, *Correspondences* and *Limpeteering* are seen as distinct assemblages but, when brought together they also become relational enmesh and interact, producing all sorts of intertwined, interdisciplinary, meandering storylines and actors.

Tales from ancient shell middens on Britain’s shores through to cutting-edge science utilizing limpet teeth in the quest to improve human dentistry are currently assembled under six thematic headings: *Tenacity* (limpet characteristics), *The Edge of the Sea* (the significance of limpets in marine ecosystems), *Midden* (the occurrence of limpets in the archaeological record), *Home and Protection* (considering the limpet shell as a form of protective shelter), *Limpet-Lore* (traditional practices, stories and myths) and *Cutting Edge* (limpets in scientific research). These narratives





are taking some unexpected twists and turns, offering a divergent but more ambiguous reading of limpets and our relationships with them. This ambiguity and other sometimes unsettling ‘affective forces’ can work in our favor, creating experiences of wonder and enchantment, those spell-binding moments that briefly shake us, connecting us with extraordinary goings-on amid the familiar and the everyday. If we are open to it, this ‘enchantment effect’ can change our relationship with the world (Bennett, 2001, p. 4), and in our case more specifically with limpets, motivating a deeper attachment and a more ethical engagement, encouraging us to act with greater care and respect towards them and their edge of the land-sea habitat.

**Unforeseen futures**

I am discovering that the methodological process of creating a socially engaged contemporary

*Wunderkammer* and the written explorations undertaken here and elsewhere are beginning to interact. Experimental creative practices are emerging from the writing and new, expressive ways of writing are developing through the creative practice. Contributions from and exchanges between human-nonhuman participants continually develops the project and *The Limpetarium* is ever-changing. Rather like the tidal cycles that are so fundamental to the life of a limpet, its creation is an oscillating process of addition, removal and shifting around of cabinets, shelving and drawers and their contents, with thoughts, ideas, material, and lines of inquiry drifting in and out on metaphorical waves. These visual, social, and textual interminglings are, I think a sign that assemblages are at work, bringing about unforeseen but productive effects.





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