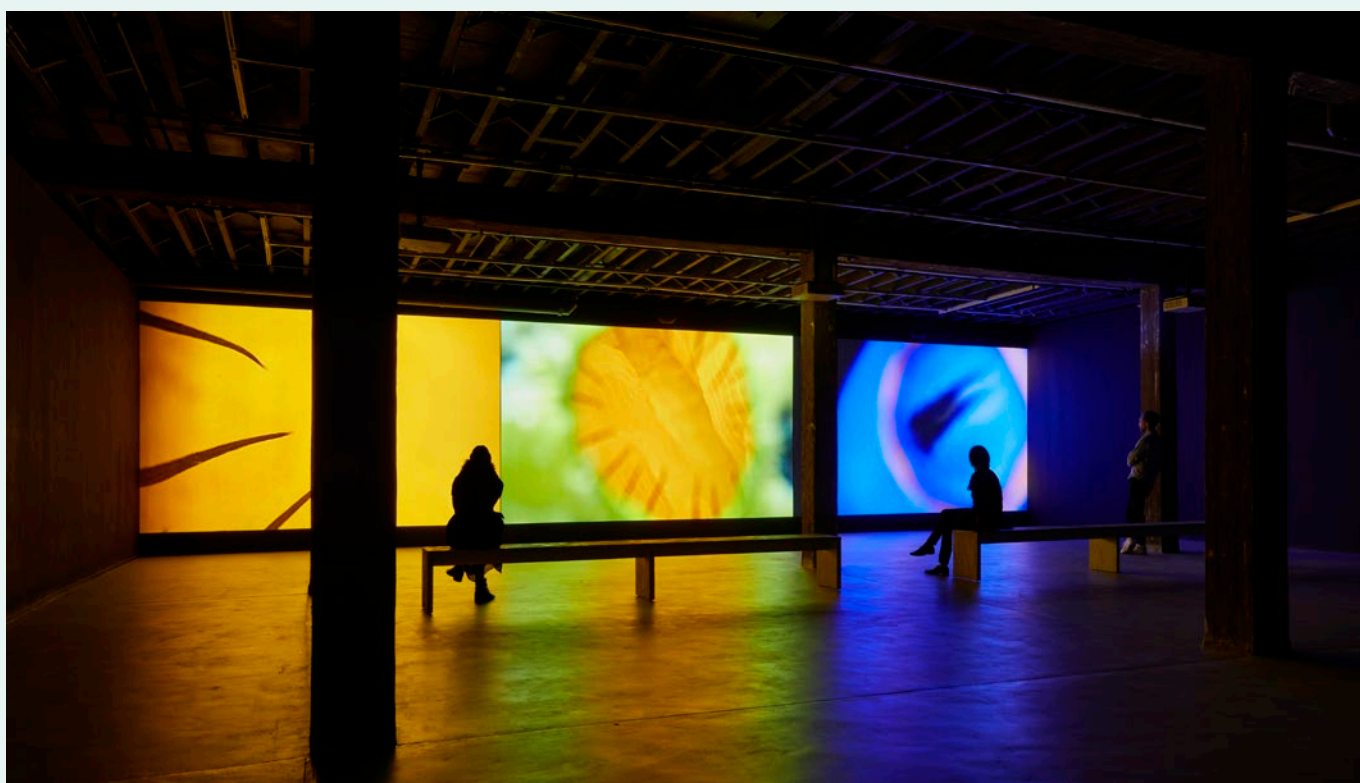


MEL O'CALLAGHAN CENTRE OF THE CENTRE



EDUCATION KIT



Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire*, 2019, (performance rehearsal) and installation at Artspace, Sydney, courtesy the artist and Kronenberg Mais Wright, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Zan Wimberley

Bottom image: Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire* (2020). Performance view: *Centre of the Centre*, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (22 February 2020-16 January 2021). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and KRONENBERG MAIS WRIGHT, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Simon Woods.

Cover: Mel O'Callaghan, *Centre of the Centre*, 2019. Installation view, Artspace, Sydney, courtesy the artist and Kronenberg Mais Wright, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Zan Wimberley

ABOUT

This education resource has been produced by Amy Bambach in conjunction with Museums & Galleries of NSW to support the touring exhibition *Centre of the Centre* by Mel O'Callaghan.

This resource offers:

- Insight into the practice of Mel O'Callaghan.
- A glossary of terms.
- Discussion and making activities for use in the classroom, or the gallery.
- Links for further reading and exploration.

The activities contained in this resource are aimed to be used flexibly by learners of all ages and abilities and may be undertaken before, during or after an exhibition visit. While these activities have been written with primary and secondary students in mind, teachers are encouraged to adapt these learning activities to suit their context and their students. We also encourage community groups, as well as gallery staff to use the information and activities in this resource to aid visitor experience.

CENTRE OF THE CENTRE TOUR

The *Centre of the Centre* exhibition by Mel O'Callaghan traces the origins of life and its regenerative forces, iterated through video, performance and sculpture. The Australian-born, Paris-based contemporary artist works across film, performance, installation and painting. This ambitious new commission offers O'Callaghan an opportunity to further explore her ever-expanding fields of influence and demonstrates the remarkable range of her artistic practice. The exhibition is co-commissioned by Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers; Artspace, Sydney; and The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane and will travel to venues nationally from 2021 to 2023.

Mel O'Callaghan's *Centre of the Centre* was curated and developed by [Artspace](#) and is touring nationally with [Museums & Galleries of NSW](#).

Mel O'Callaghan's Centre of the Centre was curated and developed by Artspace and is touring nationally with Museums & Galleries of NSW. Centre of the Centre is co-commissioned by Le Confort Moderne, Poitiers; Artspace, Sydney; and The University of Queensland Art Museum, Brisbane. With Commissioning Partners Andrew Cameron AM & Cathy Cameron and Peter Wilson & James Emmett; and Lead Supporter, Kronenberg Mais Wright. The development and presentation of Centre of the Centre is supported by the Fondation des Artistes; Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution and the US National Science Foundation. This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australian Council for the Arts, its arts funding and advisory body.



KEY IDEAS

This resource will explore key ideas presented in *Centre of the Centre* including:

- Scientific and marine exploration
- Collaboration and knowledge sharing
- Rituals and cycles
- Breath
- Performance art

GLOSSARY

COLLABORATION

the action of working with someone to produce something.

CYCLE

a series of events that are regularly repeated in the same order.

HOV ALVIN

a human-occupied vehicle which can travel to the depths of the ocean floor & is used primarily for marine research and exploration.

EXTREMOPHILE

an organism that thrives in extreme environments, such as under high pressure and temperature.

MINERAL

are solid substances that occur naturally. Minerals make up Earth's rocks, sands, and soils. They are found on Earth's surface as well as deep underground.

PERFORMANCE ART

artworks that are created through actions performed by the artist or other participants, which may be live or recorded, spontaneous or scripted

RITUAL

a religious or solemn ceremony consisting of a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order.

SCALE

the size or extent of something



Marion Buchloh-Kollerbohm, Head of Cultural Mediation at the Palais de Tokyo (Paris, France) facilitates a workshop

CULTURAL MEDIATION: STARTING A CONVERSATION

Cultural mediation encourages an open-minded approach to art, which is fostered through processes of inquiry and discussion. Here are some ideas that could be helpful in guiding an inquiry-based, open discussion of an artwork with education groups:

Allow students to look closely at an artwork first and then discuss it as a group, encouraging students to share their observations & personal interpretations. When discussing the artwork, try to ask different types of open-ended questions that prompt varied responses and further conversation. Examples can include:

- What do you notice about the artwork?
- What does the artwork remind you of?
- How does the artwork make you feel and why?
- What was your first reaction to this artwork? Why?
- How would you describe this artwork to someone who has never seen it?

- If you could ask the artist a question, what would you ask him/her?
- How do you think this artwork was made?
- What do you think this artist is trying to say in this artwork?
- What title would you give this artwork? Why?
- What do you think would it feel like to be in this artwork?

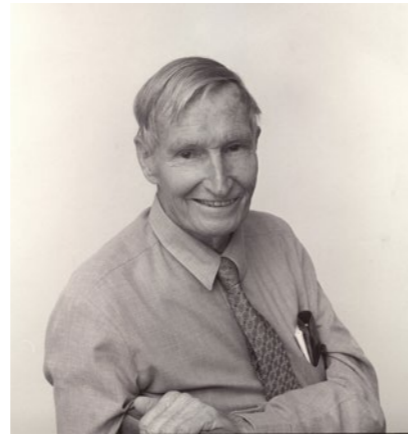
Asking follow-up questions such as "what do you see that makes you say that?" can be helpful to elicit students to build on their initial thoughts. If you choose to share information about the artwork and artist, make sure it is relevant and meaningful to the discussion while still allowing students to share their personal and imaginative responses to an artwork.

PRIMARY

MINERAL AND MARINE EXPLORATION



LEFT: Chapman Mineral Collection on display at the Australian Museum. Photo courtesy of the Australian Museum.



RIGHT: Albert Chapman. Photo courtesy of the Australian Museum.

STARTING POINTS

Did you know that rocks, sand and soil are made up of a mixture of solid substances called minerals? Minerals are naturally occurring and often look like crystals. They are found on Earth's surface as well as deep underground. One of the rarest minerals on earth is a diamond.

The artist, Mel O'Callaghan, was inspired to create her exhibition *Centre of the Centre* after she was given a mineral by her grandfather Albert Chapman.

Think of a gift you have been given by a grandparent, or someone you care about. Draw it here:

Share your drawing with a friend, or your class group. Discuss:

- What was the gift and why was it given to you?
- What made this gift special to you?

The mineral given to Mel O'Callaghan by her grandfather holds a small pocket of water, which is possibly millions of years old. Imagine all the things this prehistoric mineral would have seen happen in the world over this time! List some of these things below:

<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>	<hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/> <hr/>
---	---

DISCUSS

This mineral inspired Mel O'Callaghan to travel many kilometres under the ocean to create her film *Centre of the Centre*. Watch the film carefully for a few minutes.

- What does this landscape remind you of? Why do you think so?
- Close your eyes and listen to the music. Make some movements to the music with your hands.
- Describe how the music makes you feel.
- Why do you think the artist chose this music?
- The size of the video takes up an entire wall. Why do you think the artist chose to make the video this large?

Centre of Centre was filmed in a deep-water submarine called HOV Alvin.

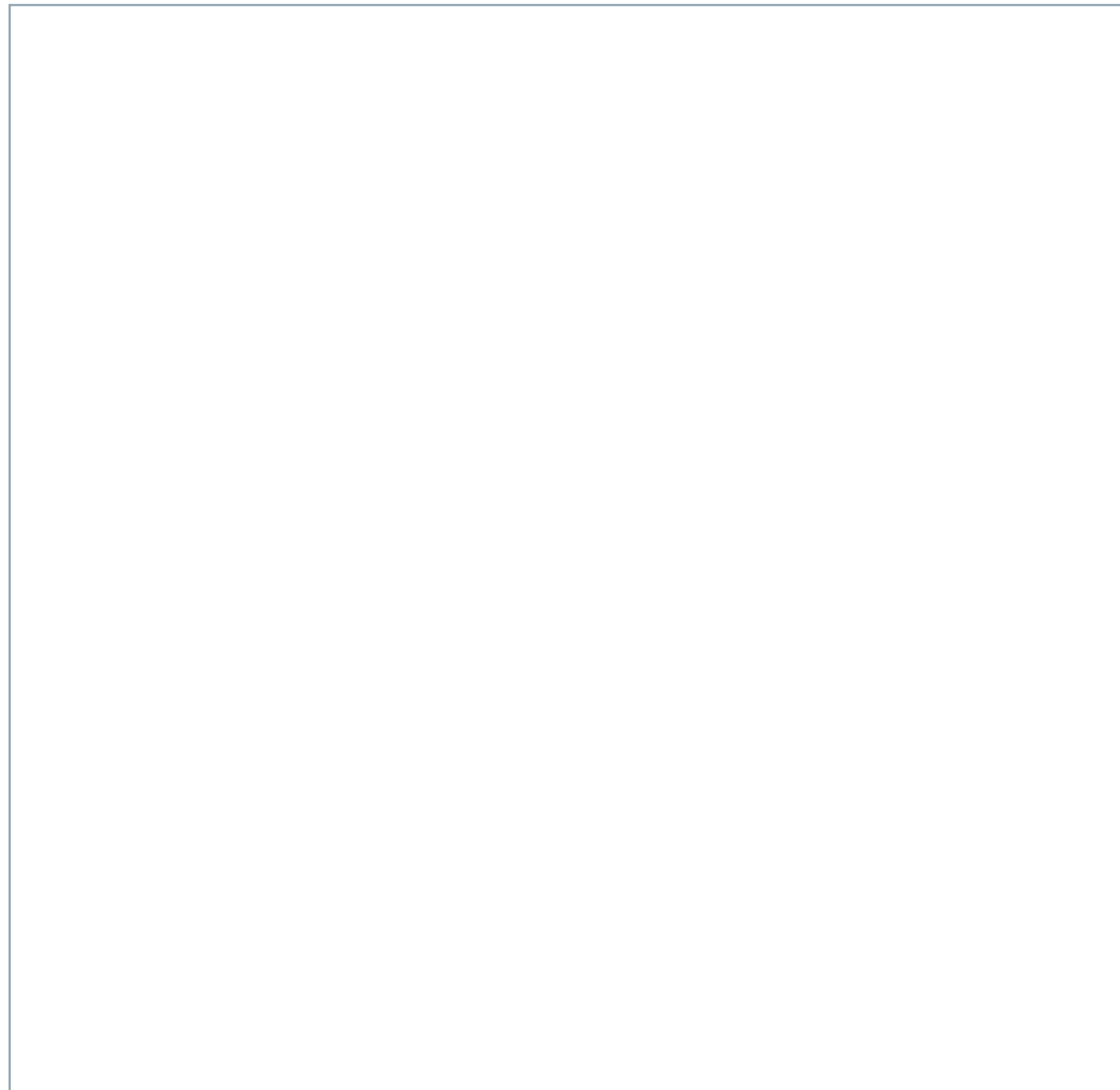
- What do you think it would feel like to travel in HOV Alvin? Why?
- What might you see or hear travelling in HOV Alvin?
- What hard-to-reach place would you like to explore? Why?

RESPOND

In *Centre of the Centre* we can see examples of extremophiles - organisms that live in extreme environments. Some of the extremophiles in Mel O'Callaghan's film live almost 2,500m under the ocean near hydrothermal vents and underwater volcanoes. They live in temperatures as freezing as 2°C to as hot as 250°C!

Invent your own extremophile & draw it in the space below. Consider:

- Where does your extremophile live? (eg: maybe somewhere very hot, cold, dark, windy, high up)
- What special features does it need to survive in this environment?



CREATE: DIY CRYSTALS

In nature, one way mineral crystals form is when water is heated deep inside the Earth and minerals dissolve in the hot water. As the hot water approaches the surface, it cools slowly, leaving behind mineral deposits.

You can make your own crystals at home by dissolving minerals in water and letting them cool! Try it yourself by following the method below. Remember to get an adult to help you!

- Have an adult help you heat 4 cups of water until it is almost boiling
- Pour the hot water into a glass container
- Add 2 cups of borax and a few drops of food colouring. Mix it all up for 60 seconds
- Bend a pipe cleaner into an interesting shape. Tie the pipe cleaner to the middle of a skewer, or a pencil, using a piece of string.
- Place the skewer across the top of the container and let the pipe cleaner hang into the liquid.
- Let the mixture cool overnight. The next day you will see crystals form!
- *Note: For non-toxic options, you can adjust the method and use bicarb soda or sugar!*

Extend it: Write an experiment procedure and report about the crystal making process.

CREATE: SCIENTIFIC SKETCHES

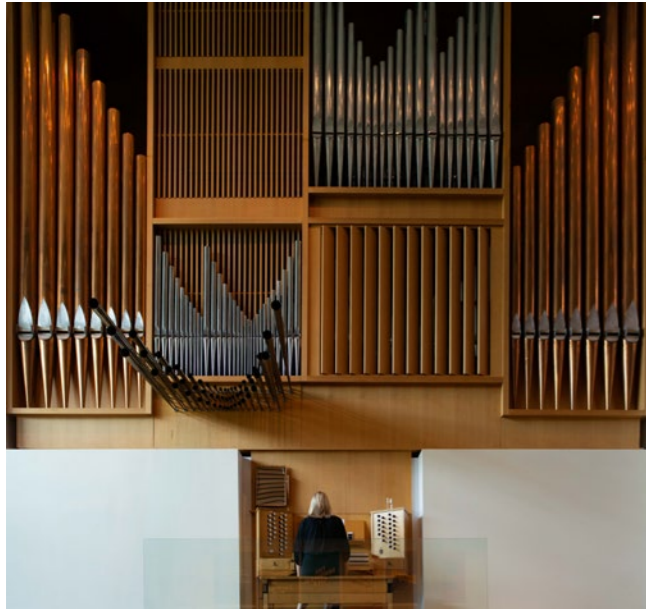
Grandfather Chapman's large collection of minerals is now owned by the Australian Museum, so that many people can view it and learn from it. View [the collection](#) online. Choose a photo of a mineral from the collection. Pretend that you are a geologist and draw a picture of your mineral specimen as carefully as you can. Write a description to go underneath your drawing. Remember, before photography was invented, geologists had to use words and drawings to record their discoveries - so you want to capture as much detail as possible!

Extend it: Watercolours are a great material to use to recreate the look of mineral crystals or agates. Experiment with techniques like 'wet on wet' (watercolour on wet paper) and sprinkling salt on wet watercolours to create a crystal-like texture. Just remember to brush it off your paper once it dries!

RESEARCH PROMPTS

Research one of the extremophiles below and create a scientific report about it. Think about creative ways you could present your report, including a presentation, slide-show or poster.

- *Polynoid Scale Worm*
- *Riftia Worm*
- *Polychaete Worm*
- *Alvinella Pompeii Worm*




Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire* (2020). Performance view: *Centre of the Centre*, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (22 February 2020-16 January 2021). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and KRONENBERG MAIS WRIGHT, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Simon Woods.

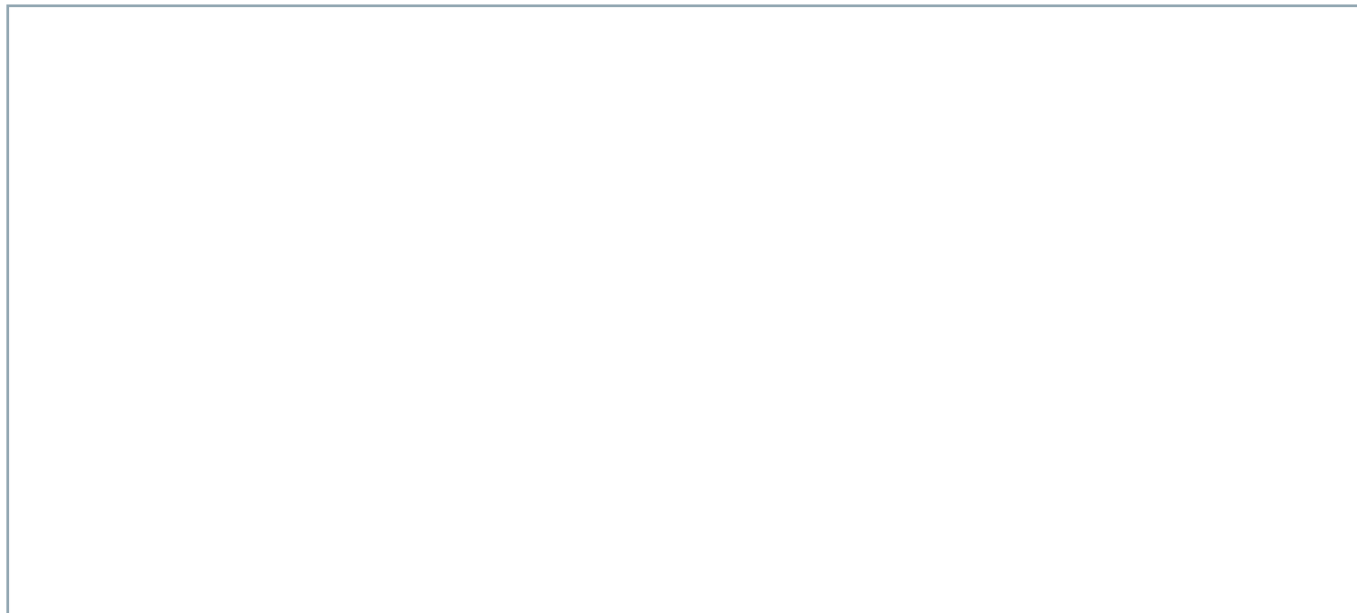
SECONDARY COLLABORATION

STARTING POINTS

Have a volunteer stand behind one of the glass sculptures in *Respire, Respire*. In the space below, complete a quick sketch (2-3min) of the person through the glass (just as you see them!).



Now, draw the person again, but this time as a group! In the space below, draw the figure for 30 seconds. Once time is up, pass your paper to the person on your left. They will then continue with the drawing for another 30 seconds. Once the time is up, they will then pass the paper again to the left for the next person to continue. You pass your drawings around the circle a total of 6 times.



CONSIDER:

- Which of the two drawings do you think is more interesting? Why do you think so?
- What was challenging about 'sharing' your drawing?
- What did you enjoy about 'sharing' your drawing?
- Who do you think the owner of each drawing is?
- How is this different to traditional forms of artmaking?

DISCUSS & RESPOND:

Watch the film *Centre of the Centre* carefully for a few minutes. Then discuss:

- What do you think is going on in the artwork?
- How do you think this artwork is made?
- What do we know about the artist after viewing this artwork?

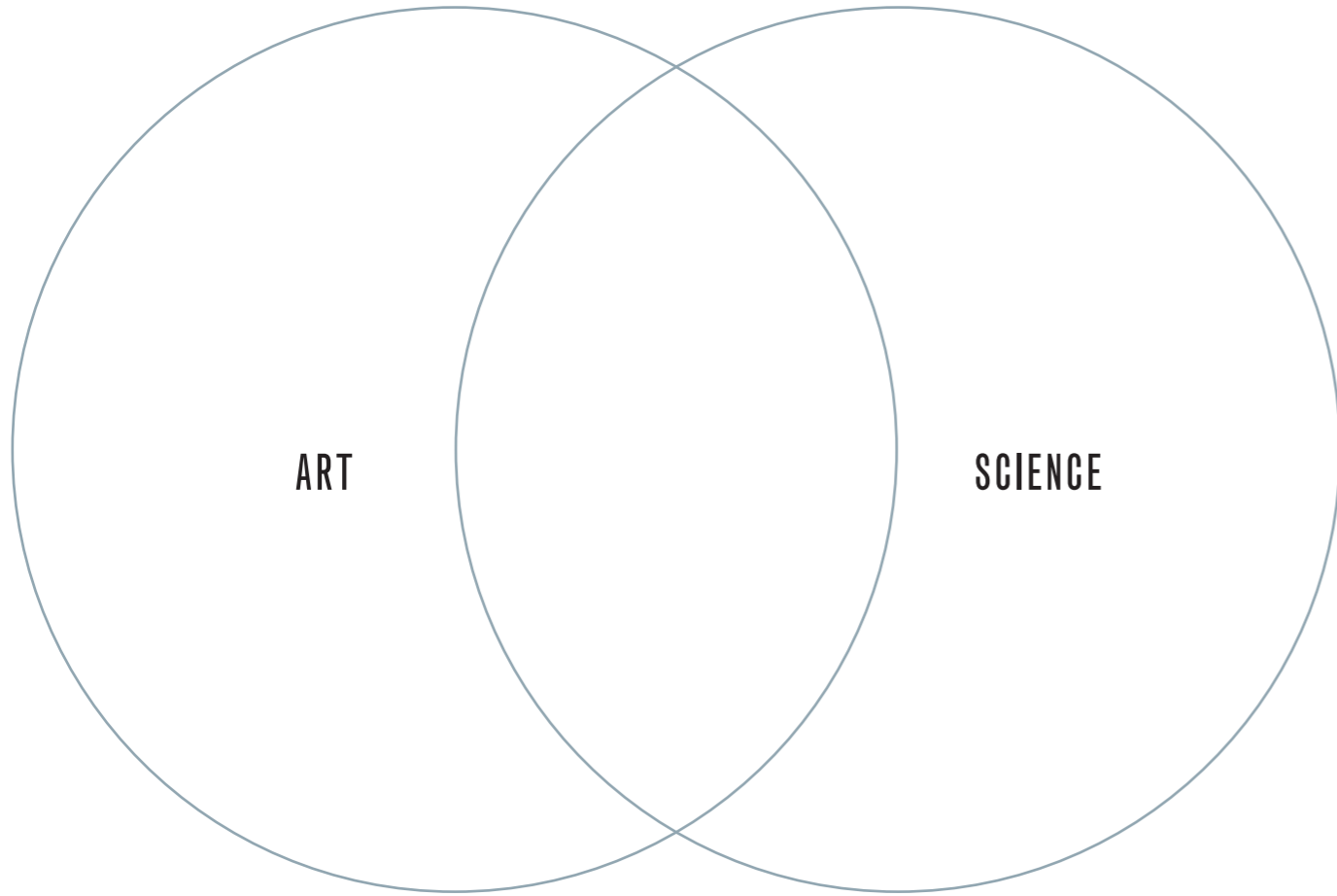
To make the film, Mel O'Callaghan collaborated with some of the world's leading scientists. She embarked on a three-week deep-sea dive in the Pacific Ocean in the human-occupied submersible Alvin. The trip was led by scientist Dr Daniel Fornari & supported by the team from the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute.

Do you consider a film like this to be science, or art, or somewhere in between? Fill out the Venn diagram on the next page to help organise your thoughts:

- In the left circle, list the characteristics that you think make *Centre of the Centre* an artwork.
- In the right circle, list the characteristics that you think make *Centre of the Centre* a scientific study.
- In the centre, list the characteristics of *Centre of the Centre* that apply to both art and science.



Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire* (2020). Performance view: *Centre of the Centre*, UQ Art Museum, Brisbane (22 February 2020-16 January 2021). Reproduced courtesy of the artist and KRONENBERG MAIS WRIGHT, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Simon Woods.



- Considering the information in your Venn diagram, do you think that *Centre of the Centre* should be considered an artwork, a scientific study or both? Explain why you think so.
- Did your thinking change, or did it stay the same?

Mel O'Callaghan also worked with other experts including Dr Sabine Rittner, a researcher with the Institute of Medical Psychology at Heidelberg University, to create the performance *Respire, Respire*.

- When making an artwork, why do you think an artist would choose to collaborate with others?
- What do you think the benefits would be? What would be some challenges?

CREATE: MACRO/MICRO

Centre of the Centre plays a lot with scale - the film captures mountainous volcanoes, which may seem small to microorganisms that seem enormous on the screen. Take a series of macro or close-up water photographs that experiment with scale. Give the following ideas a try!

- Add droplets of oil into water to create abstract shapes and patterns.
- Drop an object into a water-filled vessel, such as a glass bowl.
- Capture water droplets on glass.
- Capture water drops hitting the surface of water.
- Use refraction to capture images, colours or backgrounds inside vessels or drops of water.

Extend it: Manipulate these images with photo editing software, such as Photoshop. Experiment with cropping and colour editing to make your images seem as large as expansive underwater landscapes, or, as small as petri dishes under a microscope!

CREATE: COLLABORATIVE FILM

As a group, make your own collaborative short film that interprets the phrase "*centre of the centre*".

Think about what roles each member of your group will play (director, filmographer, editor, sound). How can you assign these roles to suit each person's strengths?

RESEARCH PROMPTS

When Mel O'Callaghan's collaborated with the WHOI team, she started to think about questions such as, "*What should we be attending to as human beings? What should we actually be taking care of?*" Research sustainable environmental management and protection practices within Australia, including traditional knowledge of First Nations people.

NOTES:

SECONDARY PERFORMANCE & RITUALS

STARTING POINTS

One of the underlying themes of this exhibition is action of breath. Let's begin with a breathing exercise:

- Find a comfortable seat in an upright position and close your eyes.
- Take a big, deep breath in through your nose and out through your mouth. Feel the breath reaching gently down into your abdomen. Notice the sensation of your breath and how your body expands as you breathe in, and how your body softens as you breathe out.
- Now count your breaths. Count 1 on the inhale, 2 on the exhale, 3 on the inhale, and so on up to 5. Then repeat back at 1 and start your breath cycle again. Continue for 30 seconds.
- Once you feel comfortable, add a hum to your exhaled breath. Continue for 30 seconds

Open your eyes.

- How did you feel during this breathing activity?
- Did the way you feel change as time went on?
- How did your experience or energy change after you added sound?



Mel O'Callaghan, *Respire, Respire*, 2019, and installation at Artspace, Sydney, courtesy the artist and Kronenberg Mais Wright, Sydney; Galerie Allen, Paris; Belo-Galsterer, Lisbon. Photo: Zan Wimberley

In Mel O'Callaghan's performance works, the performers often participate in strenuous physical labour. However, at the same time her work aims for the performers to experience a sense of contemplation, meditation or even a trance-like state.

- Did you feel a sense of contemplation of meditation during the breathing exercise?
- How could the exercise change to create this feeling?

DISCUSS

Look around the space of *Respire, Respire*. These sculptures are used as 'performance tools' where performers move around the space and interact with these pieces. Each performance goes for 20min.

- How do you think the performers might interact with these pieces? Consider the title of the piece, the form of the sculptures and how they are arranged in the space.
- Why do you think Mel O'Callaghan would have used glass to create her 'performance tools'?
- Compare *Centre of the Centre* to *Respire, Respire*. In what ways are they similar? How are the two works different?
- The idea of cycles is a key idea throughout the exhibition. Where else can you see this reflected in the artworks and exhibition? Think about display and installation, titles and materials.

Watch the performance of *Respire, Respire*.

- How did you feel while watching the performance? Why?
- Did it remind you of anything you've seen or experienced?
- Did you watch the performance live, or a video of the performance? How might it have been different to experience the performance in its other form?

Respire, Respire was filmed and documented and is available to watch on Mel O'Callaghan's website.

- What do you think the advantages and disadvantages are to documenting a live performance?
- Are photos or videos of the performance considered an artwork themselves? Why or why not?
- Do you think that documentation changes the value of the performance itself? Why or why not?

Both artworks in the exhibition have been created around the same themes, and in a sense, mirror each other.

NOTES:

RESPOND

A ritual is a series of actions performed according to a prescribed order. Often rituals are a religious or solemn ceremony, but there are also rituals that we enact every day.

Can you think of some rituals that you take part in? They could be personal, family, community or religious-based. For example: having a birthday cake on your birthday or a routine you follow for good-luck before a sporting game.

Write out the steps involved in the ritual below:

Working in pairs, choose one of the steps from the ritual - for example, blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. Perform this action 10 times.

- What happens when you act out the action by itself in this way?
- How did it feel to repeat the action over and over?
- What impact on your body did you notice or experience during the performance? (For instance, tiredness, or a sense of calm).

REFLECT

Mel O'Callaghan notes that:

“RITUAL IS ABOUT FEELING A SENSE OF SECURITY IN SOCIETY. I THINK IN WATCHING THESE ENDLESS ACTIONS THAT PEOPLE KIND OF FALL INTO THIS MEDITATIVE STATE AND PERHAPS CONSIDER THEIR OWN HUMAN CONDITION.”

How do you feel about this statement after your performance?

CREATE: CYCLES

Plan and deliver a performance work investigating the idea of a cycle (a series of events that are regularly repeated in the same order). When developing your performance consider the following elements:

- artist: will you perform the work? What will you wear?
- space: where will you perform the work? What props will you need?
- time: how long will the performance go for? Will you document it, and if so how?

Extend It: Many performance and installation works are actually recreated from a set of instructions written by the artist. Write a set of instructions for your performance & give these to a peer to perform. As a class, you might host a performance symposium!

RESEARCH PROMPT:

Durational artworks are marked by their relationship with time, often pushing the time and action to the extremes of endurance.

Research examples of other artists who have created performances around the idea of physical resistance, endurance and rituals including: Marina Abramovic & Ulay, Alan Kaprow, Yoko Ono, Joseph Beuys, Tehching Hsieh, Tino Seghal and Mike Parr.

CREATE: BREATH WORKS

Create an artwork or a series of artworks inspired by the idea of breath. Consider the different ways you might be able to capture or record breath - such as through sound, photography, film or drawing. For instance, you might take photos of someone's breath on glass, create drawings of lungs and respiratory systems, or record the sound of breathing for an installation.

NOTES:

**MEL O'CALLAGHAN
CENTRE OF THE CENTRE**

EDUCATION KIT