

**Re/Search Praxis in the Academy: Enacted/Experienced/Embodied (Re/Searching the Soul):**

*Grimm, Erica*

*This summer I must admit that I was discouraged. Every morning I sat in my suburban garden courtyard, surrounded by cascading sage, mint, lavender, thyme and tarragon, contemplated the figs budding and swelling on branches, sipped my doppio espresso, and opened the morning paper to what seemed a world gone mad. I was served a daily dose of atrocities, a steady stream of war, pestilence and slaughter; while typhoons, earthquakes, drought, and floods raged. From every corner of the globe, horror assaulted my senses and imagination: in the middle east be-headings for God's sake-not one but three, a Malaysian airplane simply disappeared, a second blown up over the Ukraine, Nigerian schoolgirls were brazenly kidnapped. In Gaza, Sudan, Pakistan, and even here on our highway of tears- it was women and children; in Northern Iraq whole communities; in the US an unarmed black teenager, slaughtered. All the while the death toll from Ebola mounted. I wondered if I had woken up inside a video game or in the middle-ages.*

*And very day evidence mounted on how the climate is indeed changing, ocean acidification is rising (scallops grew shells so soft they died), ocean plankton gorged on decomposing plastic islands disrupting the endocrine balance all the way up the food chain. David Carr, media critic for the New York Times tweeted about "the most murderous of summers. He speculated that perhaps "nature and*

*man had held a conclave and decided to reign down horror on the innocent, the suffering and the wretched of the earth.” But he is wrong- nature had nothing to do with any of the summers atrocities or ecological apocalypses.*

*I sat surrounded by the beauty of herbs, figs and flowers, the calmness of my zen nest (as I call it) and wondered. Felt helpless. Contemplated. And asked questions. I asked do I still believe the conclusions that Gerard Maney Hopkins came to when he saw the ash tree in the corner of his garden felled in 1918? Do I still believe that*

*The world is charged with the grandeur of God. ?  
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;  
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil  
Crushed. Why do men then now not wreck his rod?  
Generations have trod, have trod, have trod;  
And all is seared with trade; bleared, smeared with toil;  
And wears man’s smudge and shares man’s smell: the soil  
Is bare now, nor can foot feel, being shod.*

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*And for all this, nature is never spent;*

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*Do I still believe this? That nature is never spent? That it will be renewed unlike the bodies of all those unfortunates slaughtered this summer? I am told by my brother that in the uninhabited zone between North and South Korea an extinct animal has reappeared...he saw it....so perhaps. I ask myself what it would mean to be totally present in this place, at this moment in time, in my own skin? And can anything I do make a difference? How might I Stop, pause, and recognize what is here? The suchness, the miracle of this present moment? The mystery of billions of years of unfolding that has resulted in life now? That oxygen is. How*

*might I wake up, see and accept what is? That the sun rising causes a neural cascade of healing and safety in my garden. How might I embrace, draw close, hold tenderly the collective grief, and my own? How might I give (be flexible), be responsive not reactive in the face of change?*

*These are the questions I bring with me into my artist studio.*

## **Re/Search Praxis in the Academy**

(side 1) But this afternoon (given that I am not in my studio) I would like to consider:

What is it that artists do in their studios anyway?

Do artists even belong in the academy?

Can the multiple ways in which *meaning is made* in artist studios—all those embodied, non-linear, messy, multi/inter disciplinary, tangled processes and objects that arise in studios—can they be named as research?

Can this messy multi-directional process really be productive of new knowledge?

And do artists deserve grants?

The 2012 inclusion of Research/Creation designations across all SSHRC Talent, Insight and Connection programs suggests that the academy is widening its definition of what constitutes research. But, not everyone agrees. In an Academic Research Council meeting here at TWU I heard the response of “*good luck*” to my statement that the definition of research is widening. But non-traditional research/praxis processes are

flourishing: as the many *practice and arts-based research* publications, as well as the new practice led Visual PhD programs would indicate.

(slide 2) First a bit of SSHRC history: In 2001, the *Working Group on the Future of the Humanities* came to the following conclusion: “*we must bridge the gap between the creative and interpretive disciplines and link the humanities more closely with the arts communities.*” That in response to what the future of the humanities held. Specifically, SSHRC identified the way contemporary artists cross disciplinary boundaries, collaborate and enfold a wide range of methodologies as being key to the transformative nature of their “vital contributions” to contemporary University research. This led to a separate grant called Research Creation, then the 2012 inclusion of Research/Creation across the SSHRC spectrum.

(slide 3) And a bit about terminology: In Canada the term **Research/Creation** is most common. But all over, the generative messing up of the research/praxis relationship is being named:

**Arts-based research** (ABR) in Arts Education (Elliott Eisner, A/r/tography group at UBC and Performative Inquirers at SFU); **practice-led** or **practice-based** research and **research-led practice** in the UK; research **in/on/for** and **through** the arts and **practice as research** in Australia. Each term has a slightly different nuance, and I love how each one fuels the generative rebalancing between praxis and research that adds to the already explosive widening of qualitative research methodologies across the academy.

Many new publications echo the conclusions of Sullivan's 2005 *Art Practice As Research: Inquiry in the Visual Arts*: that the creative, critical and cultural inquiry undertaken by artists already *is* research.

This was the first emphasis from SSHRC's *Final Report on ReSearch/Creation*. Knowledge is **embodied** in artwork just as a mathematician or physicist expresses in symbols.

Research findings result in texts and numbers, but equally can be **materialized** in image, object, gesture, sound, and space. Knowing can be made **manifest**, through the material realm and through material signs (Grimm 48)

SSHRC 's second emphasis was how creative practice, or practice led research, is a tool to achieve scholarly and operational outcomes. So for example: the research in design that, in Canada, is known as Design Thinking CBC Radio One is doing a great series *On Design*, or Shaune McNiff's work in Art Therapy.

From SSHRC's 2008 Final report on Research/Creation came a shared recognition across the spectrum that "art makes available a *distinctive kind of knowledge not available in other domains and inaccessible to other modes of inquiry*" (Pakes, 2004)

*A distinctive kind of knowledge...available only through the arts....since the point of research is to create new knowledge, then what characterizes this distinctive kind of knowledge?*

Of course the question also must be asked *what is knowledge*, but that might be a little ambitious for today's session. Suffice it to say that, happily, since the latter part of the

20<sup>th</sup> C it is widely recognized that knowledge is not always reducible to language. With Polanyi, we all *know* that we know, *a lot* more– than we can tell. The widening or de-literalization of knowledge opens the door to multiple forms of knowing (Eisner Art and Knowledge). And once meaning is loosed from its propositional shackles a cascade of methodological and research possibilities tumble before us. We are faced with the probability that the visual material realm that we are surrounded by, that we are bombarded with and that we routinely ignore, forms us and can heal us; that we can harness this energy to construct or deconstruct, to subvert, complicate or clarify; that the visual is a form of intelligence that the arts are particularly good at harnessing and are in short an active epistemology. This summer I was reminded of this during Karen Kaeja’s powerful workshop at SFU’s *Embodied Artful Practices* conference.

(slide 9-11) One of the points I would like to make is: the work that artists do in their studios is characterized by asking questions, it is inquiry based. This is important, but lots of disciplines do this. What is it that makes the knowledge that emerges *distinctive...not available in other domains...inaccessible to other modes of inquiry?* Yes contemporary art is experimental, collaborative and multidisciplinary, but what makes it distinct is that it is **Enacted, Experienced and Embodied.**

“a living inquiry welcomes movement and change, does not aim for mastery of cherry blossoms or ideas, is comfortable not only with the body resonant (Neilsen, 2004) but with the resonances, ruptures, emergences, and urgencies of bodies larger than our own; classrooms, societies, ecosystems. ... All this inquiry asks is that we attend, that we listen, attune ourselves so that we may come to our senses” (Neilsen in Springgay et al.)

Studio practices re-search, search out connections between disciplinary data banks, disrupt linear trajectories of knowledge construction, dissolve boundaries and connect disciplinary silos with rhisomatic glee. I often tell my students that art is made in the interstices between ones interior and the exterior world (and by exterior I mean our historical and cultural situatedness: place, time, history, culture, society, theory of today). As artists we need to be curious about both *self* and *what is happening now*. Both need to be scrutinized (inquired into) because art arises in the generative gap between ones subjectivity and where one has landed. But without a thinking, feeling, perceiving subject what is made cannot be even named as art. What is distinct is that we bring our ***lived experience and perceiving embodied selves unapologetically to our creative critical scholarly tasks.***

Let me give you a couple of examples:

(slide 12) Eduardo Kac's fluorescent bunny (Alba) blurs the boundary between art, science and ethics (slide 13) asks important questions regarding biogenetics and ethical edges.

(slide 14, 15, 16) Marilene Oliver asks what it means to be a body using PET scans, and

(slide 17) Stockholm's Tomas Saraceno collaborated with spider researchers and astrophysicists to ask questions about models of knowledge.

(slide 18, 19, 20) Suzanne Lacey folds social science methodologies into her work

(slide 20) and her 1991 *Mapping the Terrain* theorized 90 artists making work that does not just translates ideas into matter but makes work that really matters. It is now common practice for artists to fold a whole range of disciplinary content and methodologies into their visual practices.

(slide 21) and the collaborative intersections include most disciplines in the academy. Every critical text on Art describes these new blurry boundaries:

(slide 22) Art and Genetics, Politics, Identity, Globalization, Technology, Anthropology, Socially-Engaged Art (MiWon Kwon, Helguara, Lacey) Relational Aesthetics (Nicolais Bourriaud). All of this work is inquiry based. Questions pertaining to the research context, the art world and how this intersects with our lived experiences are asked into the gap between ones interior and exterior worlds.

(slide 23) Contemporary Art is inquiry based, experimental, collaborative and multidisciplinary and it is manifested materially, embodied. Art **constitutes an experience** does not merely reproduce one.

(slide 24) But most importantly, what makes the work artists do *distinctive*, is that it is an **active** means of inquiry. None of this work is figured out before the making starts. The answers, the compositions, the gestures, the objects come *while* working, sometimes in the midst of crisis, often as things go horribly wrong, and the solutions usually surprise us. This makes artists particularly good with change, flexibility, fluidity (flexible purposing is the term Eisner uses), *letting something new arise after the risk of*

*letting go of what we thought we were doing,...so following rather than leading*, a performative act of inquiry, as Lynn Fels frames it that takes us ...*who knows where...*into unknown territory. Lynn will talk tomorrow about the insights that led to her development of the methodology she named Performative Inquiry. Art is **enacted**; is active, is more of a verb than a noun. In the work I did with Lynn I identified a tripartite liminal structure that seems to release knowledge, and fuel energy for the making. It seems to me that knowledge in the studio is suffocated by analytical methods that hone knowledge to one sharp point, rather the process of inquiry in the studio celebrates the connecting cascade of possibilities that open.

Artists work because we do not have the answers, and we work in order to come to **insight** (Langer). We feel emotions that we know in our bones, and we let this subjective **experience** inform our making. Unlike other disciplines, we do not aspire to objectivity, do not even pretend that objectivity is possible. We ask questions in our studios, we think and listen, and we grieve and rage and pray and hope.

(slide 25) The purpose of inquiry based studio strategies is to expand knowledge and understanding; the methods are experimental, hermeneutic, dialogical and performative. They tap into the tacit knowledge that is situated and embodied in specific materials, art works and processes (see Borgdorff 2007, Fels, me). Our investigations are framed by research questions, follow systematic and rigorous method and the results are documented, exhibited and performed. Sounds like research to me.

Artists search. We search out answers to the many questions that life throws our way. Our research condenses massive amounts of data to one gesture or image that can change a life or at least an opinion. Like poetry, in this crystallization process many will recognize their own experience, and suddenly things make sense. Our methodologies invite the intuition and imagination to join with traditional scholarly practice, acknowledge that tacit knowledge (though often unspoken) is equal to analytical knowledge. That perception needs just as much honing as the intellect. And that processing information through a number of signing systems increases the probability that new knowledge will arise. That the arts are a meaning-making language situated within an historical context; and that a life of making develops discriminating observation, sensitive evaluative instincts, cognitive complexity, empathetic imaginative capacity and diverse approaches to problem solving. We experience making as a means of coming to insight that can transform artist and viewer alike.

There are many ways the world can be known and visual art and arts-based research offers important insights into the construction of knowledge about our world, visual art is a critical form of creative inquiry. In this paper I have suggested that art **enacts**, constructs and complicates meaning by virtue of it being an **active** practice, **experientially** rooted in its inescapably **materially embodied** condition, situated within an historical/critical/cultural/theoretical context. I liken art-making to an apophatic epistemology, a form of understanding that integrates visual, physical/sensory, haptic, liminal and scholarly ways of knowing. In other words: in order to come to *knowing*,

artists trust *unknowing*.

## **Re/Searching the Soul**

(slide 26) *Back in the studio this summer, re/searching my visceral response to hearing about the escalating evidence on ocean acidification, desalinization and the many related catastrophic consequences to its changing chemical balance, I wonder how to harness the tacit knowledge contained in the ocean? How to connect what we know, sense, intuit, understand about the ocean's healing capacities? About what we all know about being near the rhythmic tidal suck and pull, or about inhaling its briny benediction? That being near, in, on, or under water makes all of us feel better? And what does it mean that it seems the ocean is sick? The simple fact that ocean water, tears and amniotic fluid all share the same specific gravity (which means all these liquids have naturally the same saturation of salt) sparks a whole new series of images and inquiries, energy and hope. What further insight might arise from the collaborative energies of artist and scientist; poet and historian? What can an arts-based, performative inquiry add to what scientists know about the ocean and our relationship with the ocean? How might a handful of artists contribute to the global conversation that is happening today?*

*Incidentally after a bit of research I discovered that actually we do **not** live in the most violent of decades. In *The Better Angels of Our Nature*, Steven Pinker demonstrates that violence has been inexorably consistently and systematically across all means of measuring it, going down. Has been for decades. And you know one of the reasons why?*

*Because artists have been walking into their studios all this time creating tools to widen our collective empathetic compassionate capacity. Helping everyone to imagine another's life, a better future. The late great educator Maxine Greene knew this. Neurobiologists tell us we are hardwired for optimism. After this summer I'm not sure of that, but also this summer Michael Enright quoted Robert Fullford, and I would like to quote him here also "optimism makes farmers put seed in the ground, it makes young couples conceive children, makes business people create businesses, makes artists dream and all of us imagine a better life." So I find that I do still dream and I do still agree with Hopkins, and hope it may still be true that*

There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;  
And though the last lights off the black West went  
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward, springs—  
Because the Holy Ghost over the bent  
World broods with warm breast and with ah! bright wings.

Do artists research? Produce new knowledge? Ask questions? Interrogate issues?  
Search out what it means to be alive today? Widen research practices beyond the  
linear? Re/Search the soul? And what would be lost if we did not?