

Introduction

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⟨Immune Nations⟩ Research-Creation at the Intersection of Vaccine Science and Global Health Policy

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Kaisu Koski, *Injection Simulator* (2015)

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INTRODUCTION

NATALIE LOVELESS

This issue of *Imaginations* was originally scheduled to launch September 2020, in conjunction with the first Canadian exhibition of <*Immune Nations*> at the McMaster Museum of Art in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. As I finalize these introductory words in April 2020, the exhibition we had planned to accompany this volume is likely postponed in light of the physical distancing measures required by COVID-19: a virus—a pandemic—for which there is not yet a vaccine.¹ Universities, schools, parks, community centres, places of worship, museums, and all businesses deemed “non-essential” are closed or have been put online. Predictions for when restrictions will ease and public spaces re-open range from two to six to 18 months.

We, in Canada, are mostly staying put in our homes, reconfiguring the patterns of life that we were living only six weeks ago into new shapes that feel sustainable for the long haul—or at least the medium haul, depending on which predictive models are being consulted. For those of us with children at home, this involves “crisis schooling”—navigating online teaching modules, hastily but earnestly put together by our children’s elementary, middle, and high school teachers—while juggling entirely reconfigured professional obligations (for those of us lucky enough to still have jobs).

The backdrop to all of this is The News. Anxiety over viral contamination dominates the airwaves. Death rates rise exponentially. We watch local numbers and worry about our loved ones; we follow statistics that present a differential threat to the entire population. The stressors we do know are numerous and the stress of the unknown—the

uncharted that awaits us individually and on a global scale—is often greater still.

Exacerbating all of this are the many different stories being circulated via Facebook and Twitter that are often at cross purposes when it comes to correct action at this time. Charismatic misinformation campaigns abound and range from COVID-19 being a hoax (“Goop-Approved Shrink Says There’s No Such Thing as Coronavirus”) to a biological weapon (“The Wuhan Disease Lab Is the Focus of Suspicion and Conspiracy Theories about COVID-19’s Origins”). There are even claims that US-based software developer and philanthropist Bill Gates is only funding COVID-19 vaccine research in order to microchip and track the entire population (“Here’s what Bill Gates has to say about those COVID-19 vaccine conspiracy theories he’s pegged to”). While conspiracy theorists the world over cry wolf, the majority of us are simply waiting for a vaccine, the only real way out of this pandemic. A vaccine for COVID-19 is our top medical priority, period.

<IMMUNE NATIONS> ORIGINS

The discovery of multiple vaccines—pertussis (1914), diphtheria (1926), tetanus (1938), polio (1955), measles (1963), mumps (1967) and rubella (1969), and the quickly changing seasonal flu vaccines—have prevented hundreds of millions of deaths. Yet many citizens with access to existing vaccines still choose not to inoculate themselves or their children, as evidenced by the completely avoidable 2019 measles outbreaks in the United States and Britain (“Measles Cases and Outbreaks”).

Initiated in 2014, <Immune Nations> brought together scientists, policy experts, academic scholars, and artists to work on an interdisciplinary and collaborative research-creation project tackling complex issues related to the use and distribution of vaccines in the world today.² The project—led by Steven J. Hoffman, then at the University of Ottawa and now the director of the Global Strategy Lab at York University and a scientific director of the Canadian Institutes of Health Re-

search; Sean Caulfield, master printmaker and Centennial Professor at the University of Alberta; and myself, Associate Professor of Contemporary Art and Theory and director of the Research-Creation and Social Justice CoLABoratory, also at the University of Alberta—aimed to address a gap between knowledge about vaccines and how they work, and vaccine reception in the public imaginary, including fears and misinformation. Generously funded by the Research Council of Norway, with additional financial support from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Killam Research Fund, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, *<Immune Nations>* began with a working session held at the University of Ottawa in August 2015, during which research collaborators got to know each other and share scientific and creative research expertise, goals, aims, and initial perspectives and provocations emerging from our different disciplinary locations. Our project then continued with a second working session in Geneva in August 2016. The aim of this second meeting was to share the collaborative research-creation projects developed between the first two working sessions, and to make adjustments to these in light of the interdisciplinary insights of the team. Our final working session was held in March 2017 in Trondheim, Norway, at the Trondheim Academy of Fine Art, where we launched the first “proto” version of the exhibition as the opening event for the 10th International Conference on Global Health and Vaccination Research (GLOBVAC) while also presenting at the conference itself.

The works we exhibited address a range of issues, including vaccine hesitancy and denialism, herd immunity, vaccine access chains in the Global South (the “cold chain”), and the history of vaccine science. They do so through participatory installation, video, the production of zines, and a series of prints and photographs, all designed to engage viewer-participants in a complex, multivalent conversation about public perception, individual and group action, and global health politics surrounding vaccines today. Following the exhibition in Norway, each of the collaborative, interdisciplinary research-creation works was refined, adapted, and reinstalled at the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) headquarters building in Geneva, Switzerland, featured as part of the 2017 World Health Assembly. Opened

on May 23, 2017 by the First Lady of Namibia, Monica Geingos, and with formal addresses given by international dignitaries including the Honourable Jane Philpott, then Canada's minister of health; Michel Sidibé, then-executive director of UNAIDS and now minister of health and social affairs of Mali; Martin Howell Friede, coordinator of the Initiative for Vaccine Research at the World Health Organization; and Anuradha Gupta, deputy CEO of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, this was an opportunity for the foremost global health policy experts in the world to engage with the exhibition and think together with the artists, who were also in attendance.

<IMMUNE NATIONS> PROJECT METHOD

From its modest first working session through to this final exhibition, <Immune Nations> worked to compose new visions for interdisciplinary and collaborative research across art, science, and global health policy. Bringing scientists together with artists, and both together with scholars interested in public policy and governance, sociology, art history, and law, this project worked not only to disseminate knowledge surrounding vaccines but to offer itself as a methodological example for research-creational ways of working in interdisciplinary and international collaboration.

Over the course of the three years, we followed the basic working method of (1) meeting for a four-day working session once a year; (2) allowing groupings between participants to occur organically; and (3) facilitating online exchanges of text (conversation, readings, data), images (drawings, rough designs, found images, videos), and any other material that might help inspire interdisciplinary knowledge and collaboration. These exchanges highlighted the difficulties that come from bringing together disciplinary methods and insights that are, at first blush, incompatible—as in, for example, the contrast between the open-endedness of artistic social commentary and the determinate nature of policy.

Indeed, we had many difficult moments along the way, including moments when artists felt instrumentalized by policy experts, and when

scientists felt misunderstood by artists. Together, we worked to create a community and culture of respect for each other and to understand the disciplinary competencies of—and differences between—artistic practice, policy development, the humanities and social sciences, and medical science. That we, to a great degree, achieved this community, culture and understanding is evident in interview-response statements made by participants. As one artist participant wrote:

“My experience of collaboration in the past more significantly involved other artists. In this case, the ‘expertise’ regarding the project is shared among individuals from different backgrounds and platforms. Balancing the engagement of the various participants in order not to limit the ‘creative’ work to the artist(s) and the ‘information generation’ to other individuals is important and has been tricky. The heterogeneity of the situation means there is a greater and deeper pool of material [and] possibility to draw from. Sometimes when working with other artists, the objective is, ‘de facto,’ to generate some ‘art,’ rather than to see where the collaboration takes things. This project was different.”

A public policy expert wrote similarly about the generative process of our method, speaking specifically to the challenge of having to explore one’s own disciplinary givens through the eyes of collaborators from other disciplines:

“One challenging aspect of the collaboration is the fact that we do not share a common vocabulary much less epistemology. So terms like ‘art’ and ‘policy’ and even ‘vaccination’ carry different meanings for the different participants. [Given this,] one of the most exciting possibilities is the potential that the collaboration forces new perspectives on what were thought to be settled issues or forces a consideration of phenomena that might otherwise go unnoticed. In this case, the very premise that ‘art’ might influence policy makers is, as far as I can tell, something that has not been seriously considered before. This is exciting.”

Throughout <*Immune Nations*> we worked to develop a heightened awareness of the ways that art is too-often used as a tool merely to instrumentalize or illustrate social problems rather than to also help solve them. We were also vigilant about the ways that science is too-often used as decontextualized data or fodder for artistic expression that fails to retain any scientific use-value, and the ways that policy processes can be overly simplified or vilified into meaningless caricatures. On interdisciplinary projects such as ours, which bring art and science and policy experts together, such misunderstandings are common and underscore the need for more robust interdisciplinary literacies and languages that push us all out of our comfort zones and encourage greater capacities to speak across and with difference.

Another insight that emerged from the project was that sophisticated interdisciplinary collaboration takes *time*. It takes time to cultivate robust relationships, especially when we are all coming at a problem equipped with different disciplinary understandings. With <*Immune Nations*> we had, effectively, two full years as a team—between the first and third working sessions—to learn each-others’ approaches, priorities, perspectives, values, and needs. Everyone agreed that this was just not enough. Interdisciplinary and collaborative research is difficult and time-consuming. It demands that we all take risks, stepping into arenas where we are less knowledgeable. This process can be anxiety-provoking, leaving researchers feeling vulnerable to being exposed as incompetent when the skills of our discipline prove insufficient in another. It can also be frustrating, when what is plain in one disciplinary idiom is incomprehensible or, worse, anathema to the other.

True inter- and transdisciplinary research requires a mode of temporal and material attunement that the contemporary academy—indeed, the contemporary world—is often hostile to. It requires slowing down, taking risks, asking our questions differently, and trusting each other. It requires being attentive to each others’ differences as carefully as to our similarities. And letting those differences teach us.

ON THIS JOURNAL ISSUE

What follows mirrors the dialogic structure of our working sessions, presenting articles in multiple formats that openly discuss the project's history and evaluate the role that collaborative, interdisciplinary, research-creation can serve in bridging gaps between evidence, policy, and public opinion. While some of the contributions were able to address the coronavirus in the final stages of editing, this issue was written and largely completed prior to COVID-19. Nonetheless, we hope that the discussion in these pages might contribute to future projects that address COVID-19 directly.

The first section, Reports and Dialogues, is made up of short descriptions of each project followed by a dialogic reflection on the process of production. This section addresses themes ranging from art-as-pedagogy to the limits of conventional health communication strategies in reaching the vaccine-hesitant and -resistant. The second section, Reflections and Essays, gives context regarding global vaccination and health policy, the role of art in knowledge dissemination and political advocacy, and offers individual reflection on some of the projects featured in the exhibition. These latter reflections are written from the perspective of artist-researchers in ways that further elaborate process and method.

This issue of *Imaginations: Journal of Cross-Cultural Image Studies* is an invitation to take a look at insider insights into what it can be like, at least in our shared experience on <Immune Nations>, to work together on interdisciplinary, collaborative research-creation projects that straddle artistic commitments and commitments to scientific knowledge production and dissemination, and that work to bring new perspectives to global health policy and advocacy. The voices gathered together in this volume argue for the value of creative, innovative, collaborative, and interdisciplinary experimentations that take the *affective* aspects of scientific knowledge production and dissemination seriously. They argue for the need for new (artistic, pedagogical, and institutional) strategies that force us to ask new, more creative, questions and develop new kinds of relationships across the academy's inherited silos. When it comes to pressing global issues, such as those

we are facing with COVID-19, we need to mobilize the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences as equal partners, and be willing to learn from and with each other with respect, patience and curiosity. Indeed, it is precisely this kind of thinking and action that is required of us in the academy—and the world—today. Insights and expertise from across the disciplines are necessary if we hope to produce robust responses to wicked problems and to answer the most pressing questions of our time.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It takes a huge amount of invisible labour to complete a project of this kind. In particular, Natalie Loveless, on behalf of herself and project leads Steven J. Hoffman and Sean Caulfield, would like to acknowledge our intrepid Graduate Research Assistant for <Immune Nations>, Vicki S. Kwon. Vicki regularly went above and beyond in not only contributing to the project but supporting its organization and execution, with passion, dedication, and skill. Thank you Vicki!

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NOTES

1. As we were finalizing the proofs for this issue, it was confirmed that the exhibition is postponed to September 2021.[↵]
2. Research-Creation is a Canadian term for what, elsewhere, is called artistic research, practice-led research, or research-led practice. On research creation, see: Loveless 2019a and Loveless 2019b.[↵]



Jane Philpott, former Minister of Health Canada, and Caroline Pitfield, former Director of Policy in the Office of the Minister of Health, in conversation with Sean Caulfield and Patrick Mahon at the opening Reception, *Immune Nations*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Still image from video by Julien Duret.



Monica Geignos First Lady of Namibia, Michel Sidibé, former Director of UNAIDS, and Susan Rogers Van Katwyk, former research coordinator of the Global Strategy Lab and UNAIDS intern, at opening reception, *Immune Nations*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Roman Levchenko.



Anuradha Gupta, Deputy Chief Executive Officer of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, giving remarks at opening reception, *Immune Nations*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Roman Levchenko.



Immune Nations Team, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Roman Levchenko.



Florian Schneider, Director of Trondheim Academy of Fine Art, speaking at the joint opening reception of *Immune Nations* and the GLOVAC 2017 Conference, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Photo by Yanir Shani.



The NTNU Rector Gunnar Bovim speaking at the joint opening reception of *Immune Nations* and the GLOVAC 2017 Conference, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Photo by Yanir Shani.



Guests at the joint opening reception of <Immune Nations> and the GLOVAC 2017 Conference, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Photo by Yanir Shani.



Immune Nations Team, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Photo by Yanir Shani.
