

## **Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments**

Owen Chapman and Kim Sawchuk

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of practice and employment prospects. I assist students in identifying where making things connects meaningfully with their intellectual practices as projects progress and change. I work with colleagues and the administration to identify what we value most about the way the dissertation is structured now, even as we reimagine how dissertation practices will evolve in the future. I remind people both that the dissertation is a living form and that our own guidelines are only a few years old and, yes, can probably change. I use my networks and connect my students and find interlocutors for their work. I try to create a space where a student can be bold.

And, above all, I encourage sharing stories about failure: it is beautiful, generative, and the starting point of most good things in my life.

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> These thoughts on my own dissertation were first shared at the 2007 HASTAC (Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory) conference in a presentation entitled “Interface Epistemology: Hypermedia Work in the Academy.”
- <sup>2</sup> From Geoffrey Alan Rhodes’s 2012 dissertation proposal.

## Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments

OWEN CHAPMAN AND KIM SAWCHUK, CONCORDIA UNIVERSITY

As university-based creative makers, we argue for a more expansive category of research-creation that does not foreclose new possibilities for making and learning and does not unwittingly bolster disciplinary thinking and divides.

From 2010 to 2012, we collaborated on writing a text that aimed to clarify the idea of research-creation for our students. “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and Family Resemblances”<sup>1</sup> outlined four different modalities in which research and creation are linked within current academic practices. In brief, these categories were:

1. “Research-for-creation,” the gathering of materials, practices, technologies, collaborators, narratives, and theoretical frames that characterizes initial stages of creative work and occurs iteratively throughout a project.
2. “Research-from-creation,” the extrapolation of theoretical, methodological, ethnographic, or other insights from creative processes, which are then looped back into the project that generated them.
3. “Creative presentations of research,” a reference to alternative forms of research dissemination and knowledge mobilization linked to such projects.
4. “Creation-as-research,” which draws from all aforementioned categories, an engagement with the ontological question of what constitutes research in order to make space for creative material and process-focused research-outcomes.

Out of the four modalities we identified, “creation-as-research” received the least attention. Yet our own experience as creative makers and as professors increasingly incorporating creative practices into our courses tells us that this vexing category deserves further reflection. In this short contribution we therefore seek to draw out some of its productive ironies and tensions.

In our 2012 essay, we used Ludwig Wittgenstein’s notion of “family resemblances”<sup>2</sup> to compare projects with inconsistently shared features, without insisting on certain defining characteristics for each of the four categories we developed, and therefore for research-creation as a whole. Considered from a queer studies perspective “family” is, of course, a contested term with normative connotations. Family resemblances, in their Wittgensteinian variation, are typically generational and implicitly chronological. Features are recognized as things we inherit. They can be shared across different members of a family, but it is rare that one would say, “Grandma has four-year-old Becky’s hazel eyes.” In the same way, since terms are ultimately granted meaning through their relationships to pre-existing ones, it becomes difficult to even imagine how neologisms such as “research-creation” could be the objects of radical reconfiguration. What can be done through the articulation of entirely novel situations, lexicons, or discursive priorities? As last year’s *Practices* underscored, understanding research-creation a certain way often comes down to what sorts of examples one is willing to consider alongside the moniker. It therefore remains a contested terrain that has consequences in terms of funding and support, for both student and professional researchers.

The family resemblances approach also tends to over-emphasize similarity. Yet the methods, practices, and outcomes generated from research-creation projects, stemming as they increasingly do from multiple disciplines across the university, are far from uniform and involve the incorporation of new *and* old methods, technologies, practices, and tools. They are never entirely new.<sup>3</sup> Ideas come to life through “webs of impactful social influences and material traces...and vestiges of shelved projects that precede and inform the more cohesive works that happen to emerge.”<sup>4</sup> At issue are creative making processes that are linked to the often circuitous, “looping” character of theoretical reflection and writing, the ebb and flow of concepts, and their accumulated significance to the work of a researcher over time.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the four modes we originally outlined for research-creation occurred to us while we were in the midst of working together on geo-locative media projects. Thinking out loud about different ways that the term “research-creation” was being used, we concluded that this lexical ambiguity resulted in perennial confusion and the occasional application of inappropriate systems of assessment. Our paper was intended to rectify this.

That conversation was one of many spontaneous discussions generated from our work together co-directing the Mobile Media Lab at Concordia. As the name suggests, the MML is a place for experimentation with cell phones, tablets, and other mobile media. It can be thought of as an “incubator” with multiple locations. We are not entirely sure what we are. No matter. The MML has become a creative playground and shared space not only for our collaborations with each other, but also with different communities. Here, creation is approached as a form of research in its own right: research is understood as both a noun and a verb, and creation is not perceived strictly as a stand-in for art making. This is indeed what we sought to express when we developed the “creation-as-research” category. For us, aesthetics is a part of everyday life; the MML has roots in the audio-visual experiments of Fluxus; it incorporates some of the irreverence of the Dadaists; it pays homage to the ready-made, to DIY, and to pop culture; and it draws from a definite commitment to feminist perspectives and community-based art practices that challenge the elitism of patriarchal art worlds.<sup>6</sup>

As Loveless suggests below, “research-creation marshals new methods that allow us to tell new stories.” Or to tell old stories in new/old ways. These stories flow from a variety of disciplines and perspectives. The outcomes are increasingly multimodal, no matter the discipline. Some have longer histories of making as a means of generating and transmitting insights. To assert that making is a form of research practice in academia is to recognize the ever-increasing role of digital media production for schol-

ars, whether this is through participation in social media, websites, online forms of publication, digital archives, databases, etc., or through a plethora of personal computer-based tools for more specific types of manipulation of digital content. It is not all the same, and cannot be described with a single term. But we can recognize the gist, what lies in between these creative ways of knowing and of expressing what we think we know, and what links them in different ways. This requires recognizing the benefits of a network of terms and references linked to research-creation (critical making, creation-as-research, practice-led research, digital humanities), each of which carries its own nuances in terms of explaining the different ways one can learn through doing.<sup>7</sup>

We have a long history of collaboration, making, reading, discussion, and dialogue as co-producers and friends. Our conversations always and rapidly extend beyond the borders of our institutional walls. Deep collaborations, like a really good stew, take time. Simmering is key. These conversations, in which others have often participated, continually coalesce into new ways of explaining to students and colleagues what we are doing, and how we see it as linked to previous works. In that initial 2012 paper, the messiness of the back-and-forth process that marked the development of our four categories is belied by the neatness of the framework that emerged in written form. Indeed, it was always meant to be heuristic and not a set of dictums to be followed uncritically.

In order to preserve the messiness of dialogue and the spirit of experimentation, we use the notion of “critical making” to reference the reflexive, critical potential of scholarly work that results in self-consciously “made” outcomes. As Garnet Hertz puts it, critical making addresses “how hands-on productive work—making—can supplement and extend critical reflection on technology and society.”<sup>8</sup> While Hertz explicitly references the open-source hardware “maker” movement in his conceptualization, we are drawn to the broader implications of the term. Critical making hearkens back to what anthropologist Tim Ingold, in *Making*, describes as an important aspect of the cultivation of knowledge and insight through doing: it “pay[s] attention to what the world has to tell us.”<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, as Brian Massumi and Erin Manning propose in their reflections on research-creation, a focus on the act of making, whether material, digital, or other, places value on the relational qualities instigated through making and highlights how unexpected and even unknowable its outcomes can be.<sup>10</sup> In the case of new forms of digital scholarship, for example, there are many decisions around platforms and communities that involve creative choices. Here, creation and research are part and parcel of each other.

We have recently felt this generative connection between research and creation most powerfully in collaborations with researchers and students working from a critical disability studies perspective. Over the past three years, at the MML, we have explored the ubiquitous prejudices faced by disabled bodies in contemporary culture—utilizing research-creation/performance art techniques to develop new forms of affectively and politically charged knowledge dissemination. This process began with community-building efforts that used geo-locative media and software. One example of this is *Megafone*, a multimedia mapping project invented by Catalan artist Antoni Abad that invites “groups of people marginalized within society to express their experiences and opinions” visually and verbally via their mobile phones, and subsequently on the Internet.<sup>11</sup> The MML employed the *Megafone* platform to map non-accessible spaces in Montreal. These efforts quickly exceeded the boundaries of the original project and led to the collaborative production of video capsules about mobility discrimination, which is endemic to Montreal. The participants wanted to tell their stories using narrative forms that would allow for a situated explication of the problems they encountered on the various journeys they undertook.<sup>12</sup> The results, we believe, have social and political value *and* a transformative effect for Montreal’s artistic and cultural field.

For instance, at the Hemispheric Institute’s 2014 *Encuentro* conference and performance art festival hosted by Concordia University in June 2014,<sup>13</sup> members of the MML’s Critical Disability Studies and Performance Working Group noticed the lack of attention to accessibility at one of the venues. The Working Group decided to stage a protest at a cabaret organized for one of the *Encuentro* evenings. While the only decision taken in advance was for all protesters to arrive at the door of the inaccessible venue at a specific time, what transpired was a powerful “stair bombing” performance instigated by critical disabilities scholar, dancer, artist, choreographer, and athlete Danielle Peers. Peers crawled up the stairs with her wheelchair, slowly, deliberately, and in concert with her partner Lindsay Eales (both of Crispie Dance Company). Other disabled artists soon followed, delivering a moving, impromptu performance-intervention.<sup>14</sup> Performers and spectators from the original cabaret gathered on the streets of Montreal into the early hours of the morning for more conversations and spontaneous performances. As one artist who participated in the event proclaimed, “things will never be the same.” There have been reverberations, including more performance-protests staged in Montreal metro stations, designed to bring public and media attention to the inaccessibility of our “public” transit system. The performance has also inspired the making of beautiful and poetic theory-videos

by artist-theorists, such as Arseli Dokumaci, whose writing and video-making draws attention to invisible disability and to the impact of the built environment on bodies. These are examples of intervention practices, critical making and doing, and sense-based scholarship. It is by *making* performances, *staging* events, *holding* workshops, *crafting* inclusive conferences, etc., that we have come to learn, profoundly, about the systemic pervasiveness of ableism throughout our society and culture. This is creation-as-research as a collective long-term project shared by the artists-activists-academics involved in the collaborative crucible of the MML.

We are learning all the time about innovation from engaging *with* this perspective collectively. As critical disability comedian and activist Stella Young put it in her compelling 2014 Ted Talk presentation,

I learn from other disabled people all the time. I’m learning not that I am luckier than them, though. I am learning that it’s a genius idea to use a pair of barbecue tongs to pick up things that you dropped. (Laughter) I’m learning that nifty trick where you can charge your mobile phone battery from your chair battery. Genius. We are learning from each others’ strength and endurance, not against our bodies and our diagnoses, but against a world that exceptionalizes and objectifies us.<sup>15</sup>

So is research-creation connected to the art of living.

## Notes

- 1 Owen B. Chapman and Kim Sawchuk, “Research-Creation: Intervention, Analysis and ‘Family Resemblances,’” *Canadian Journal Of Communication* 37, 1 (2012): 5–26.
- 2 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, ed. P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, 4th ed. (Massachusetts, 2010).
- 3 Media archaeology, for instance, can benefit dramatically from a hands-on approach, as one finds in Alison Reiko Loader’s work with analog, mechanical forms of stereoscopic imaging technology (see <https://alisonreikolader.wordpress.com>).
- 4 Tara Rodgers, “How Art and Research Inform One Another, or Choose Your Own Adventure,” *Canadian Journal of Communication* 37, 1 (2012): 159.
- 5 See Samuel Thulin’s discussion of looping in such a context, building on the work of David Bissell. Samuel Thulin, “Composing Places: Practices and Potentials of Sound Mapping and Locative Audio,” PhD dissertation, Concordia University, 2015, 110–12.
- 6 With this assertion we are thinking, for instance, of Griselda Pollock’s work. See Griselda Pollock, *Encounters in the Virtual Feminist Museum: Time, Space and the Archive* (London, 2007), and

*After-effects/After-images: Trauma and Aesthetic Transformation in the Virtual Feminist Museum* (Manchester, 2013).

- 7 See Laurence De Garis, "Experiments in Pro-Wrestling: Toward a Performative and Sensuous Sport Ethnography," *Sociology of Sport Journal* 16, 1 (1999): 65–77.
- 8 Garnet Hertz, "Critical Making," 2012, <http://www.concept-lab.com/criticalmaking>. See also Matt Ratto, "Critical Making: Conceptual and Material Studies in Technology and Social Life," *The Information Society* 27 (2011): 252–60.
- 9 Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (New York, 2013), 2.
- 10 Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minneapolis, 2014).
- 11 See megafone.net.
- 12 Another project currently underway at the MML is titled "Audio Toy Box." It involves making and sharing open-source circuits and physical interface schemes for interactive, sound-centred children's toys. Following Barthes, we have noticed that "toys always mean something" (Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* [1957], trans. Annette Lavers [New York, 1972], 53), often in ways that mirror societal norms and expectations. Society's ableist tendencies are reflected in the toys that are usually given to children. The MML toys, on the other hand, are designed to be cross-ability, but with adaptations that make them stimulating for children with developmental delays

who need extra help with their communication skills. Our propositions encourage parents and specialized educators to customize the toys/games and develop their own physical interfaces for children to explore. While not expressly "art" on the level of the objects created, these new toys, in their relationships among discovery, repetition, and play, are performative, improvisational, and musical.

- 13 An *Encuentro*, "part academic conference, part performance festival," is organized every two years by the Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. For *Encuentro* 2014, see <http://www.concordia.ca/events/conferences/encuentro-en.html>.
- 14 For more information on the Performing Disability/Enabling Performance working group at *Encuentro* 2014, see The Disability Performance Working Group, "Work Group Statement," 12 September 2014, <http://mia.mobilities.ca/encuentro/work-group-statement/>. Participants, in no particular order, included Tamar Tembeck, Yvonne Schmidt, Carola Garcia, Janet Gibson, Margaret Ames, Ashley McAskill, Danielle Peers, Faye Ginsberg, Lindsay Eales, Kelsie Acton, Koby Rogers Hall, Maria Schirmer, Heather Vrana, Véro Leduc, Laurence Parent, Jennifer Jimenez, Stephen Sillett, Baraka de Soleil, and Eduardo Farajado.
- 15 Stella Young, "I'm Not Your Inspiration, Thank You Very Much," *TedxSydney*, April 2014, Transcript available at [http://www.ted.com/talks/stella\\_young\\_i\\_m\\_not\\_your\\_inspiration\\_thank\\_you\\_very\\_much/transcript](http://www.ted.com/talks/stella_young_i_m_not_your_inspiration_thank_you_very_much/transcript).

## Towards a Manifesto on Research-Creation

NATALIE S. LOVELESS, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

As the above contributions show, over the past ten years research-creation has slowly shifted the landscape of artistic practice, pedagogy, and funding in Canada. Alongside the progressive turning of art schools into universities, debate over whether art can—or should—count as research, whether research-status is antithetical to good art, and whether research-creation constitutes a specific genre of artistic practice has led to a proliferation of panels and conferences, articles and books. The issues raised are many, but most interesting to me has been tracking how "inter-theory" debates, characteristic of the critical discourse of interdisciplinarity, shift when pushed to cross so-called "practice/theory" lines.

Based on this research, in the winter of 2014 I developed the first seminar taught at the University of Alberta explicitly on the topic of research-creation in Art and Design. The course, *Debates in Art and/as Research*, began with the reading of two books:

Thomas King's *The Truth About Stories* and Donna Haraway's *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness*.<sup>1</sup> Neither made obvious sense to my students given the topic; neither refers explicitly to the nebulous and contested territory of research-creation. What they allowed us to do, however, was to begin by considering the way that research-creation practices work to tell new stories within the academy.

As most readers will know, research-creation is the main term used in Canada to speak about arts-based research. Terminological precursors to research-creation (such as practice-based research, practice-led research, and artistic research) find their origin in over thirty years of international discussion focused mostly in Western and Northern Europe and Australia.<sup>2</sup> While structurally tied to its status as a national funding category designed to increase available research funding for artists working in universities in Canada, research-creation