RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne
Canadian Art Review

RACAR
Revue d'art canadienne | Canadian Art Review

Introduction: As if from nowhere... artists' thoughts about research-creation

Risa Horowitz

Volume 39, Number 1, 2014

URI: https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1026194ar
DOI: https://doi.org/10.7202/1026194ar

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Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)
1918-4778 (digital)

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Cite this article

Horowitz, R. (2014). Introduction: As if from nowhere... artists' thoughts about research-creation. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, *39*(1), 25–27. https://doi.org/10.7202/1026194ar

Article abstract

Cette section inaugurale de *Pratiques* met en valeur, du point de vue de la pratique et de la recherche-création, la réflexion des artistes quant à leurs processus de travail et leurs oeuvres. S'il est clair que les artistes travaillant dans les universités font face à des défis particuliers, liés aux demandes croissantes de la part des institutions universitaires d'articuler leurs cadres méthodologiques et l'application de ceux-ci dans leur travail, ils jouissent également de la possibilité d'approcher, de partager et de présenter d'innombrables manières le fruit de leurs investigations créatives réalisées dans le contexte de la recherche-création. Les contributeurs à cette section – Marlene MacCallum, David Morrish, Christof Migone, Donna Szoke, Barbara Meneley et Risa Horowitz – s'expriment ici sur leurs recherches et sur les approches méthodologiques qu'ils privilégient. Ils révèlent et articulent l'éventail de leurs démarches, ainsi que les diverses façons dont ils conçoivent les méthodes, les pratiques et les modes de dissémination, de documentation et d'exposition dont disposent les artistes pour la recherche-création.

Introduction: As if from nowhere… artists' thoughts about research-creation

Risa Horowitz, guest-editor / rédactrice invitée

Résumé

Cette section inaugurale de *Pratiques* met en valeur, du point de vue de la pratique et de la recherche-création, la réflexion des artistes quant à leurs processus de travail et leurs œuvres. S'il est clair que les artistes travaillant dans les universités font face à des défis particuliers, liés aux demandes croissantes de la part des institutions universitaires d'articuler leurs cadres méthodologiques et l'application de ceux-ci dans leur travail, ils jouissent également de la possibilité d'approcher, de partager et de présenter d'innombrables manières le fruit de leurs investigations créatives réalisées dans le contexte de la recherche-création. Les contributeurs à cette section – Marlene MacCallum, David Morrish, Christof Migone, Donna Szoke, Barbara Meneley et Risa Horowitz – s'expriment ici sur leurs recherches et sur les approches méthodologiques qu'ils privilégient. Ils révèlent et articulent l'éventail de leurs démarches, ainsi que les diverses façons dont ils conçoivent les méthodes, les pratiques et les modes de dissémination, de documentation et d'exposition dont disposent les artistes pour la recherche-création.

Over the past two years I have worked alongside colleagues with the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) to increase the participation and exposure of artists in the association's activities, notably, in our annual conference and in *RACAR*. I am so pleased that UAAC has embraced this endeavour and that *RACAR* has welcomed me as guest editor of this inaugural *Practices* section of the journal.

I am critical of the impact on university-based artists of the increasingly prevalent institutional requirement to articulate our methodological frameworks and their application in our work.[1] I trace this imperative to two sources: recent Conservative Party federal budgets that earmark funds for academic research to foster "partnerships between post-secondary researchers and companies" in order to "target research to business needs and transfer knowledge into economic advantage;"[2] and the ways that the Social Sciences and Humanities research Council (SSHRC) has presented ever-changing definition over the past several years, as artists working in universities vie to compete for prized external research grants.

As part of the first cohort of York University's practice-based PhDs in visual arts (studio art) I was preoccupied by the problems of identifying and understanding the differences between art practice and practice-based research; the relationship between the criteria and assessment guidelines for written work and those for works of art; and the challenges presented by inviting artists to use art to create knowledge rather than using knowledge to create art. My main concern was to identify the contributions artists can make that are unique to artists and that do not duplicate the works of other scholars. This translated, for my doctoral and continuing research, into my focus on the activities of my art practice as methods, rather than on the form, meaning, or contents of the works of art produced (which are already very effectively addressed both by artist statements and by writing about art by critics, art historians, curators, and others). In my dissertation[3] I argued for the importance for artists to define our own terms of reference in relation to the practices, methods, and criteria used in peer assessment within academia. While working on this *Practices* section I asked Christof Migone if in his work the text is as vital as the action, the photograph as communicative as the performance, the battered microphone as evocative as the amplified sound of its destruction. In other words, do these elements have equal footing as forms of scholarly dissemination and expression within his art practice? He replied that they rarely have equal footing within an academic context, where peer review is conducted on the basis of external criteria that privilege the word.

There are so many ways that standard practices for artists' research diverge from those in many other disciplines, and we are in a position now, or perhaps are obliged, to name and articulate these practices and modes. In this vein, I am relieved and happy that the editorial team of *RACAR* agreed with me that it is both impossible and undesirable to attempt to conduct a blind or double blind review process for artists' research appearing in the journal, since documentation for our works can so readily be found online on artist and gallery websites, and on the pages of so many art journals and blogs. I understand the contributors' pages in this new *Practices* section to be a form of documentation of original research and believe that such documentation, like art works, is best disseminated as widely and in as many forms as possible.

I selected the contributions of Marlene MacCallum, Barbara Meneley, Christof Migone, David Morrish, and Donna Szoke for this first *Practices* section because, though wildly diverse in their approaches, each articulates a form of research that complicates the way that the creative and the scholarly have been held and continue to be held at a distance from each other. At the level of methodology, my email dialogue with these contributors mirrors my position that for artist-researchers, the functions of research, creation, and dissemination are complexly iterative, intertwined, and reflexive. This idea is not new. A survey of the existing literature on practice-based and other research methodologies will uncover a plethora of articles articulating it in various ways.[4] What is new is a broadening of the

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discourse within artist-research cultures in universities across Canada.

Marlene MacCallum's work highlights research-creation as a linear-yet-circular and ongoing process, where, as I see it, what is often considered the end game—dissemination—is placed into a hermeneutic circle of continuity that locates the experience of knowledge (lived and shared) as necessarily reflexive and as taking place throughout a project's life and beyond. MacCallum has collaborated with David Morrish on a SSHRC-funded project that explores "dissemination as an integral part of the creative cycle." In our email exchanges MacCallum identified her "uneasy relationship" with the formality of installing art within galleries. In her practice the artist book has become increasingly important as both a creative and a disseminative form. She has noted a shift in her own practice from the privileging of the unique print to the iteration of source images in explorations that include making, sharing, and engaging with viewers who are also collaborators and neighbours. "Practice-based research," MacCallum notes, "engages direct and immediate application and realization of knowledge" in what can be understood as a linear process of research-creation-dissemination. However, working within Corner Brook's Townsite area and with her neighbours there allows MacCallum to engage a public directly in knowledge sharing and exchange: the "practice is the inquiry itself," a form of experiential learning for both herself and her townsfolk, and in this sense the process is not so linear. The bookworks function as both art work and documentation of the inquiry.

The possibilities for re-arranging the timeline for research-creation-dissemination presented by MacCallum's work have a counterpoint in the possibilities presented in David Morrish's re-arranging of the materials and processes for making art objects with art objects themselves. Morrish makes use of the installation trope not as a form of public dissemination, but as a self-directed "resource for the creation of new art works," as he described it in our email exchanges, "a framework for more real work yet to come." For Morrish, the disseminated objects are publications, "paper objects that function in the space between the document and the art-object." He transforms the personal ritual of collecting into the creation of a fictionalized museum located in his private studio without framing the practice as an artwork in itself. *The Lyric Cranium* is a fascinating expression both of the ways that artists self-engage and of the ways that they communicate these engagements: "The viewer may exist only as the person who sees and reads the ephemera" produced—the photographs, photogravures, mixed-media prints, custom wallpapers, broadsheets, print-on-demand books, and videos that are created both to be placed inside and disseminated outside the installation. *The Lyric Cranium* serves as a multi-layered set of productive simulations of research, creation, and practice that softens the distinctions that are too often made between dissemination and documentation.

Christof Migone's work highlights the experience of anticipation that punctuates an art practice—even if, as he wrote to me, "at best the artist functions as a filter." When I asked him to share his thoughts about the distinctions made by SSHRC between research and creation (by naming these as two separate activities) and about re-positioning art from being the object of scholarly inquiry to being constituted as a form of scholarly inquiry in itself, he rightly and gently admonished me for asking. For Migone such a line of inquiry reinforces both the entrenchment of arbitrary distinctions between "research," "creation," and "scholarship" and a misguided definition of what is deemed to be "creation," as if it "comes out of nowhere."[5] His argument is not so much that art making and research are the same thing, but that since "artists do their research, the term 'research-creation' is redundant." Migone's proposal in *The Micro Series* to "punctuate every moment" suggests the risk both of undifferentiated equalization and of permitting the amplification of each and every moment to the level of "the noticeable." If research-creation is a redundant term, can an articulated equalization of the activities engaged through it serve to be revelatory (if only, as MacCallum shared with me, to exercise an "educational function in helping non-fine arts colleagues understand that there is rigour" in the work of the artist)? Yet Migone's works rarely seem to be didactically articulated: instead he places recipients in a position that renders them capable-of-knowing without such a strenuously explanatory set of objectives. He does not speak it.

For Donna Szoke, art practice is a thing "in flux" that also highlights a sort of Deleuzian immanence in the "shift from transcendental knowledge to integrated action," and perhaps also from doing to knowing. While Szoke is skeptical of the idea that "research implies a rational order by which we justify creative outcomes," she nonetheless describes her work as if critical engagement plus theoretical reflection equals the production of artworks. It is very clear that nothing is so straightforward for Szoke, yet she, and perhaps all of us, falls into such linguistic traps when attempting to translate from thought to communication. In our email exchange Szoke echoed my fears that in speaking of research-creation, even if critically, we run the risk of entrenching it: "I am hopeful and skeptical," she wrote, "in this cultural moment where research-creation signals the possibility of an approach to art scholarship within a richer context of process and enfoldment," but with a "deep suspicion that this current moment is steeped in neoliberal agendas of

non-self-apparent rationalism." Cutting through such fears is Szoke's linking and integration of thinking and making, of process, thought, and response, and of the "reasonable & senseless," which may well hold true for all creative practices.

Barbara Meneley demonstrates the balanced, or holistic, methodology about which I have been writing. When I asked her what contributions to scholarly knowledge artists can and do make, she replied, "What is meant by 'scholarly knowledge?' As scholarly researchers, artists have opportunities to name all the ways learning happens and model the potential in research that reflects balanced ways of knowing." Meneley describes the way that a "gesture learned with the right hand can be translated and expressed with the foot…[and that by] tracing colonial maps [she] can know the human hands that made them." These are the sorts of inward-oriented or self-reflexive experiences of an individual in the making. Like Morrish's *Wunderkammer*, they describe how art is used and how to use art as a strategy for personal transformation and for social and political critique. Can we "appropriate, subvert, and reshape" entrenched values and criteria for rigorous scholarship in the same way that Meneley does with colonial visual communication strategies, to "tease dominant" ideologies and "interrogate" slippages and gaps? And shall we attempt the same in a self-critique of definitions of *artist*, *creation*, and *research* in a way that challenges stereotypes about what artists do and what art is capable of affecting?

SSHRC currently defines research-creation as "an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices,"[6] as if creative research practices were not, or should not be understood as, a form of academic practice. As if, to echo Migone, academic research practices came out of nowhere. In my own contribution to the *Practices* section, I note that my *Imaging Saturn* project engages activities within the academic, art, and astronomy communities in ways that are sometimes indistinguishable, where "for example, a weekend spent camping is a form of dissemination of artistic knowledge, the creation of drawings is a form of investigative research, and a gallery exhibition is a form of information gathering." A practice-based research methodology means that dragging my friends, colleagues, and students out in pyjamas at midnight to photograph the aurora borealis can become a rigorous academic method.

The contributors to this issue of *Practices* present their knowledge in their own voices, both visually and textually. My main editorial goal has been to highlight artists' thinking in relation to their work processes and finished works, within and up against the framework of practice-based research/research-creation. I hope that this *Practices* section serves to elevate perceptions of artists' research. As the primary sources of knowledge about our work—and by work I mean all the work of our practices, not only the art objects we produce—we as artists have agency in experiencing, sharing, and presenting that knowledge in countless ways.

Notes

1 These were discussed during the panels I chaired at the 2012 and 2013 annual UAAC conferences.

2 Government of Canada, *Budget 2012*, Chapter 3.1. http://www.budget.gc.ca/2012/plan/chap3-1-eng.html (accessed 15 July 2012). Budget 2014 does not specifically mention knowledge creation that cannot be applied instrumentally to economic advantage or business need: http://www.budget.gc.ca/2014/docs/plan/pdf/budget2014-eng.pdf, p. 116 (accessed 24 February 2014). This is of course not unique to Canada: Brad Buckley and John Conomos note that the 2008 Review of Australian Higher Education *Bradley Report* harnesses "knowledge and research to productivity, 'living standards,' and the wealth of the Nation." Buckley and Conomos, "Introduction," *Rethinking the Contemporary Art School: the Artist, the PhD, and the Academy*, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2009, p. 4.

3 *Disciplining Art Practice: Work, Hobby, and Expertise in Practice-Based Scholarship (Blurry Canada, Potager, Scrabble)*, York University, 2012.

4 An excellent reading list can be found on the website of the Transart Institute: http://www.transart.org/artistic-research-reading-list/ (accessed 24 February 2014)

5 I owe thanks to Migone for inspiring the title of this section.

6 Government of Canada, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, "Definition of Terms," http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programs-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22 (accessed 18 June 2012; 13 October 2013; 02 March 2014).