

A response to 'Provoking Failure: Unsettling a Research-Creation Framework' by Glenn Lowry.

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This paper is a resultant output from participation in the [Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation 'Think Tank' event](#), March 23 -25, 2014, at the University of Alberta, Canada (keynote speaker: Dr Donna Haraway). I was an invited respondent, participating in the 'Think Tank' with a 10-minute provocation paper responding to a text by fellow 'Think Tank' participant Glenn Lowry (Emily Carr University of Art and Design). This article, developed from the provocation, was commissioned towards a publication of collected outputs from the 'Think Tank'. The collection, edited by [Dr Natalie Loveless](#) who convened the event, is currently under review with the University of Alberta Press.

Knowings and Knots: Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation 'Think Tank' event was organised by the University of Alberta ['Research-Creation Working Group'](#), funded by the [Kule Institute for Advanced Study](#) towards addressing the following research question: what modes of knowing are facilitated by the complex intersections of art and research?

A response to 'Provoking Failure: Unsettling a Research-Creation Framework' by Glenn Lowry.

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Glen Lowry's text provokes us to consider the approach to knowledge production that is currently known in Canada as 'research-creation' and the funding streams that encourage it, as both methodological and institutional shifts that forge new hybrid forms. The text encourages a consideration of research-creation as a space of translation and negotiation between and across the expressive, the emotional, the poetic, the social, the historical, the political and the critical; an interdisciplinary language across multiple registers that research-creation is so methodologically well-placed to speak. Lowry notes that the verbs of research-creation provide a mode of communication that imbricates critical and creative thought and action; knowledge is always *practiced*. Through learning these verbs, Lowry provokes us to consider the emergent possibilities of approaching the complex issues of the world we find around us through what he calls "critical creative collaborations", a description that indeed captures the dialogic methodology of the research-creation approach, and its sister term 'artistic research' more commonly used in Europe.

As I will fold back to later further in, this response to Lowry's provocation comes at a time when questions of artistic research and the practice of knowledge are much on my mind as I work through the final stages of my own transition from artist to artistic researcher – or the term I prefer to use to self identify: artist/academic. My own academic life moves back and forth between the academic cultures of my two home countries, Canada and the UK. Having previously taught Visual Art at the University of Regina in central Canada and experienced all the shockwaves of the SSHRC-shifts, I now teach Fine Art at Coventry University in the UK where the tensions pull more towards the metrics obsession that currently stifle British academia. Dialogue and collaboration are central to the methodological framework my current research aims to build, approaching the ethics and aesthetics of dialogue-based art from the perspective of translocality, a position that places the concerns of local to local connectivity in the context of global networks, transfers and flows. Lowry's concept of "creative critical collaboration" is therefore one that resonates with my own experience of the interdisciplinary (or extra-disciplinary) work of the artist/academic.

One of the examples of a creative critical collaboration that Lowry shares with us from his own knowledge-practice is the work that continues between artists, academics and communities to address the colonial legacy of Canada's Residential School system and the gaping wounds that injustice has left scarred across the Canadian landscape. Glen's reference to Algoma University in Sault Ste. Marie Ontario¹, as the site of the 2012 *Reconciliation: works in progress* event and as a former Indian Residential School, provides a thoughtful provocation towards architectures and how knowledge builds from lived experience and lessons long over due. This reconstitution of the Shingwauk Residential School, closed in 1970 and re-opened in 1971 as the then Algoma College, transformed a site of trauma and injustice into a institution that now houses both a University (Fig. 1) and the Shingwauk Residential Schools Centre, one of the largest

¹ <https://www.algomau.ca>

archives of residential school life in Canada (Fig.2).² No longer suppressed, the building holds a history that current students and researchers at Algoma University work within.



Fig.1



Fig. 2

Artist and writer Hito Steyerl draws our attention to a similar transformation in her project *In Our Midst*³ undertaken in 2009 as part of European Capitol of Culture activities in Linz, Austria, which investigates the former Nazi Bridgehead Buildings in the main square, now part of the Linz Art Academy. In her article *Aesthetics of Resistance? Artistic Research as Discipline and Conflict*⁴ Steyerl describes her project as one that investigates the building as architecture, social history, power structure and physical matter, through a process of removing, then exposing, the veneer of concealment (Fig 3 and 4).



Fig.3 Copyright: Gabu Heindl



Fig 4. Copyright: Andreas Kepplinger

As her excavation-as-investigation of the facade reveals, the building is constructed from stone likely to have been quarried at the Mauthausen concentration camp, which operated twelve miles east of Linz from 1938 – 1945, and heated by radiators transported from Mauthausen to the building in Linz towards the end of the war. From its past association with the terror and crimes of National Socialism, the building now house the Linz Academy of Art's 'Department for Artistic Research' and it is with this point that Steyerl brings us to the question of how should we *know* this building? The disciplines of architecture and art might describe and categorize the building by its aesthetic style or building techniques, in this case the neoclassical tradition, yet Steyerl asserts that the methodology of artistic research enables an investigation beneath the surface of the material construction of the building and the social history of its use that reveals “the

² <http://shingwauk.org/srsc/>

³ http://www.linz09.at/en/projekt-2177243/unter_uns.html. Concept Hito Steyerl. Project Staff Sebastian Markt (historian), Gabu Heindl (architect), Niko Wahl

⁴ <http://eipcp.net/transversal/0311/steyerl/en>

trace of suppressed conflict” (p.1). Steyerl’s article uses this example to explore the practice of ‘artistic research’, a term in the growing lexicon of hybrid practices at the interface of art and academia. As we are reminded in Steyerl’s article, disciplines ‘discipline’, they police their own knowledge-boundaries, regulate their methods and by doing so presuppose the forms of knowledge outcomes that emerge. I interpret Lowry’s concept of “critical creative collaboration” in relation to Steyerl’s “aesthetics of resistance”, as a methodological position that works towards a liberation of *knowing*.

Lowry shares with us the professional pathway that places him in this meeting point of creative and research practices and by doing so encourages each of us to reflect on our own travels. I, too, was not “born” a research-creationist and found myself drawn to the methodological approach of artistic research by forces other than the research-creation stream of SSHRC funding. I started full-time University teaching in Canada with the identity and professional training as an ‘artist’. Somewhere over the years, between the regulating force of University citizenship, the pleasure of collaboration and working in teams, and the irresistible interdisciplinary entanglements that University life can forge, that identity shifted to University teacher/researcher and finally to artist/academic. In practical terms, the shift from artist to artistic researcher can be best exemplified by the questions I now ask myself when designing a new project: How might this research forge interesting new dynamics with colleagues, hopefully ones good at grant writing? How might this research enable me to travel and to experience and learn new things? How might this research fit strategically into University agendas to enable funding streams and satisfy promotion criteria? Or, in the context of the art-practice led PhD I am also undertaking alongside teaching, how does this creative work advance the argumentation towards answering my research question?

This journey from independent artist to employed academic has led to a questioning of the forces that guide research directions. Should we be led by our own personal curiosities and research interests as many of my University colleagues would argue? Or should we instead support our University and national research directives and be focused and strategic with our intellect and our creative energies, working with our peers towards solving the ‘grand challenges’⁵ of our times and agenda’s put forward by others? What are our responsibilities to serve the institutions we work for, the communities we work within, the colleagues and students we work beside and the strategic directions that funders urge us to take - to imagine the future, and to mobilize our knowledge within defined priority areas? How should we address the “disciplines and conflicts” that frame our concerns? I pose these questions not to attempt to answer them but to suggest that engaging with such questions and entering this arena of debate marks the shift from the position of artist to artistic researcher.

Lowry’s text reflects on his journey towards research-creation as an *unsettling* of his settler status in Canada, his class privilege and significant gender. Reflecting on my own shift from artist to artistic researcher reveals a similar learning journey towards an *unsettling* position. In 2010 I took on the role of Head of Visual Arts at the University of Regina, a university in the Canadian prairies that shares its campus with First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv), an indigenous-focused institution. Though once strong, relations between the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Regina and its sister area of Indian Fine Arts at FNUniv had suffered from staff turnover and the resulting

⁵ In 2014 I joined Coventry University in the UK who at that time framed its research agenda around seven ‘Grand Challenge Initiatives’: Low Carbon Vehicles; Low Impact Buildings; Integrated Transport and Logistics; Digital Media; Ageing Society; Human Security; and Sustainable Agriculture and Food.

loosening of friendship connections and common threads. My counterpart, Cree artist and Associate Professor Judy Anderson assumed leadership around the same time and together we agreed to prioritize developing a project with the aim of relationship building. We proposed to our respective colleagues a group exhibition of artworks created by teaching staff, and further, suggested the possibility of works created between staff through a process of collaboration. What resulted was an exhibition project called *Critical Faculties* between staff from the two institutions, held at the First Nations University Art Gallery.

While our colleagues each decided to pursue production of individual works, Judy and I developed a work collaboratively, and subsequently collaborated further with Dr Rebecca Caines to reflect on the work via a co-authored peer reviewed journal publication. The project was a turning point in my own development, the move from the making of artworks to an expanded practice of artistic research, but more specifically as a learning experience in indigenous ways of knowing, developed through friendship. The work Judy and I produced, *QR Code Project*, consists of two elements, each undertaken through a process of skills exchange. The first element is two wall pieces with black and white QR codes⁶ created using traditional Canadian Aboriginal beading techniques and framed within red Stroud cloth, one beaded by Judy Anderson and the other by myself following her instruction. I had never beaded before; the process is extremely time-consuming, particularly for a novice like myself, and the production of the works took hundreds of hours, many of which we spent together, talking and sharing our family histories. What I learnt from Judy is that the act of beading is undertaken by the hands, the spirit and the heart as part of a community; or put another way, Judy taught me the fundamentals of an indigenous methodology. The second element in the work is a series of online video files of dialogues, accessible via scanning the beaded QR codes with a web-enabled device and QR code-reading software. The videos feature seven people who self-identify as Aboriginal and seven non-Aboriginal people, all from Saskatchewan, Canada, paired with each other, telling stories about their own personal experiences with new technologies. Judy and myself edited the videos, with her learning an integral part of this aspect of the process. Alongside Judy and myself, the participants in the work are all colleagues, friends and family of the artists: Rebecca Caines and Novalee Fox; Lionel Peyachew and John Campbell; Riel Gauthier and Willow Goddard; Katherine Boyer and Eileen Anderson; Deb Murray and Jesse Goddard; Cruz Anderson and Elijha Goddard. The participants were asked to write their story down and send them to us in advance. We paired the stories, simplified them, and interwove the texts to create simple back and forth scripts. When the beaded QR code wall pieces are scanned, each one of the two wall pieces connects the viewer to one half of a video conversation, hosted on the web and programmed to change to the next dialogue every ten minutes. To view the work in its entirety therefore, two viewers must cooperate together, each with a camera-enabled and internet-capable mobile device (Fig 5 and 6).

⁶ A Quick Response (QR) code is a matrix barcode made up of black square modules on a white square in a grid pattern that is optically machine-readable.



Fig. 5

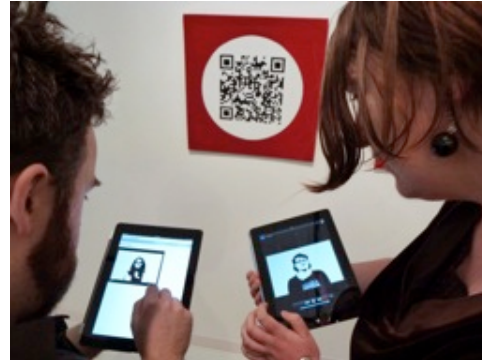


Fig. 6

The *QR Code Project* used an approach to “critical creative collaboration” central to my own research - dialogue-based art - to build a bridge between two communities, physically close but culturally distant where dialogue remains problematic. The politics that restrain mobility between the two buildings are the result of the residual colonial legacies still deeply embedded in Western Canadian society; without the provision of a context, students and faculty from the University of Regina rarely enter the First Nations University of Canada building and vice versa. While the face-to-face aspects of the work, and the *Critical Faculties* exhibition in general provided a dialogue-based interaction between the two institutions and two sets of individuals that was welcomed on both sides, I came to the understanding that it was the possibility of risk and disruptions in the work that spoke to the broader dialogues that remain difficult to hear. At times, the dialogue in the work breaks down completely with the glitch of technological error, but the most emotionally and politically powerful disruption in the piece is the decision that Judy’s colleague in Indian Fine Arts at FNUniv Professor Lionel Peyachew makes to tell his story in his first language of Cree. By locking out non-Cree speakers, both settlers and the majority of indigenous peoples in Saskatchewan, Peyachew draws attention to the painful issue of indigenous language suppression, a legacy of the Residential School system and the broader project of cultural genocide that was enacted against indigenous people in Canada.⁷ His decision challenges the very notion of giving voice to indigenous positions: give voice in whose language? Peyachew positions English as the immigrant non-indigenous language, unsettling the status quo and challenging the dominance of the ‘settlers’ language and by extension, he provokes us to consider multiple ways of knowing.

This provocation from Peyachew brings us back to the question of ‘knowledge’ and the hierarchies of methodological positions that both indigenous ways of knowing and artistic research inherently challenge. As Lowry identifies in his essay, there is growing interest in exploring the formative status of art and design research as a practice-led methodology. How then can we begin to understand this meeting point between art and research? Christopher Frayling’s early writing on the subject in 1993 is often cited as a foundational text in the debates that followed. He defined three approaches to the relationship between art and research. Firstly, research *into* art and design, we can understand simply as the discipline of Art History or related investigations of what artists did or do, where research outputs follow the traditions of a standard written text.

⁷ On May 31st 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada released their findings. The Executive Summary document begins with the following statement: “For over a century, the central goals of Canada’s Aboriginal policy were to eliminate Aboriginal governments; ignore Aboriginal rights; terminate the Treaties; and, through a process of assimilation, cause Aboriginal peoples to cease to exist as distinct legal, social, cultural, religious, and racial entities in Canada. The establishment and operation of residential schools were a central element of this policy, which can best be described as “cultural genocide.”” The Executive Summary document can be found at: http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/2015/Findings/Exec_Summary_2015_05_31_web_o.pdf. It is published in English and French.

Secondly, research *through* art and design is the approach we would now identify with the terms “research-creation” and “artistic research”, where creative practice is the laboratory, the testing ground for new ideas, with the action research of practice accompanied by contextualization and analysis in some form. The third approach that Fraying sets out is research *for* art and design which he articulates as “research with a small r”, i.e. the gathering of materials to inform an artistic outcome (Frayling, 1993, p.5). The implication of this final category is that an artistic outcome holds the knowledge of the research, without recourse for a supplementary written text. At the time of writing in 1993 Fraying remained skeptical of the viability of this final category to produce ‘Research’ (with a big R) given the implication that all artists in the history of art would then become eligible for posthumous research degrees.

In more recent scholarship, Kathrin Busch unpacks Fraying’s category two, the questions of how artistic knowledge might be understood, by proposing nine variants of approach that incrementally shift the practice of art from what she defines as “the classical philosophical notion that art is a sensual form of truth” towards what we would now understand as “artistic research” (Busch 2009, p.1). In her first category, Busch articulates *art with research*, or otherwise described as an approach to the production of art that operates in parallel with “a conscious reception of contemporary theory”. An example that Busch gives to illustrate this variant is a surrealist painter who undertakes an investigation of theories of psychoanalysis parallel to work in the studio. In this example, theoretical research is understood as a constituent part of the artist process. In category two, Busch addresses *art about research*, as an approach where an artist might depict the process or outcomes of scientific knowledge as the subject of a work of art. An example given is the painting *An Experiment on a Bird in the Airpump* by Joseph Wright of Derby, an artist recognized for his representations of the Industrial Revolution. Busch makes the point that in this approach, the ‘art’ and the ‘knowledge’ remain separate, as object and subject, with art operating as a means of communicating through visualising the knowledge (or the research) produced within another separate disciplinary field. In the next category however, *Art that understands itself as research*, Busch gives the example of institutional critique where the investigative or data-gathering research activity of an artist constitutes both research *and* the artistic practice. Busch refers to Andrea Fraser as an artist who operates in this manner, performing research undertaken as institutional critique *as* works of art. *Art as science* defines category four, that is, art practices that are understood as knowledge production alongside and in the same manner as other forms of scientific knowledge production. It is within this category that I would argue the PhD by art practice finds itself located: art practices that make claims to new knowledge through the standard mechanisms of a research question addressed through ‘systematic’ and ‘repeatable’ named methods, precisely the position that Busch’s article sets out to critique. Busch poses the question “why should the assumption that art is a form of knowledge already include turning it into science? On the contrary, has not artistic research as research practice earned its right to be taken seriously enough without subjecting itself to the norms of scientific research?” (p.4). While we do indeed now have numerous examples of PhD’s via art practice, particularly in the UK and Australia, that disrupt and challenge the “norms”, Busch’s point is well made in the fact that while disruptions to the norms have proved themselves viable and permissible within regulatory frameworks, they are still deviations from what is considered the norm. Busch’s critique then leads to the 5th category, *art above science*, an approach that undertakes a critique through art of scientific knowledge, citing the work of artists Mark Dion and Fiona Tan who investigate scientific classification and display strategies. By understanding *art as a different form of knowledge*, category six explores the role artistic research might perform in subverting what has traditionally been understood as

“knowledge”. Busch suggests that art can “reveal the concealed, the flipside of knowledge”. The role of artistic research therefore could be to articulate a way of knowing “which cannot be articulated within the respective fields of knowledge” and in particular that which is excluded from the scientific methodology (p.4). While Busch posits an epistemological critique of the “scientification” of artistic knowledge which can be applied to how individual artistic researchers position their approach to knowledge production, a question that Busch’s position implies is how institutions construct the architecture of third cycle (research degree) awards in the field of artistic research, which, in the main, is the PhD.⁸ Evoking Foucault, Busch reminds us that the truth-claims of “objective, absolute, consistent, scientific knowledge” powerfully suppress alternative claims to knowledge. In response to the previous category, Busch asks us to consider the practice of “knowledge criticism” in her seventh category, a position that casts a sceptical gaze on building artistic research on a foundation of scientific standards. Instead, she proposes *art as a poetics of knowledge* as a means to question and challenge the “construct” and primacy of scientific knowledge. In her eighth category, Busch proposes a *hybridization of art and research* that sits at an interdisciplinary border between art knowledge and science research traditions. It is from this position that the “open and discursive” qualities of art can impact on the sciences and “theoretical discourse”, towards the development of what Busch called “hybridized forms of knowledge”. In structure, a research-creation PhD submission could be understood in this way, with a text following the norms and conventions of a standard doctoral submission (an identified research problem, methodologies chapter and literature review etc.), led by the production of creative works, and proposing outcomes of relevance to multiple fields. Busch concludes in her ninth and final category with the proposal that the development of artistic research has led (or could lead?) to an intermediary “zone of knowledge” with the possibility of interconnection between artistic and scientific knowledge and a place for the “unknown”. Busch’s provocative naming of this liminal sphere indeed captures the uncharted terrain and the spirit of exploration of undertaking artistic research: *wild knowledge* (p.6). In imagining this feral, unlanguage, untamed, undisciplined and *unsettling* approach, we can perhaps see its unpredictable and evasive knowledge in fleeting glimpses from multiple points of view, but never understand its outcomes in their entirety.

In conclusion, I would like to address Lowry’s provocations around failure and the tensions the research/creation paradigm brings to University Art Departments. As Lowry rightly states, straightforward practitioners – artists who make and show work – find themselves at odds with current University agendas and increasingly swimming against the academic tide. Colleagues hired for their artistic excellence, musical virtuosity, or prowess on the stage, highly acclaimed in their professional contexts and at their time of hiring within the University context, now find themselves diminished in the face of a perceived moving goalposts and derided for not getting with the SSHRC program, for having the wrong kind of terminal degree, for not engaging with the Office for Research Innovations, and for not adhering to a strategic research plan that tells them they should be “working together towards common goals”.⁹ But indeed those of us whose indigenous or creative ways of knowing sit outside the traditional gates of knowledge, *should* be working together towards the common goal of dismantling the barriers and re-framing the discourse. If not us, who else? As Busch reminds us, the aim of research-creation /

⁸ The PhD, with its embedded traditions of scientific knowledge production, remains the most prevalent degree classification for artistic research in the countries that have developed a third cycle level. However, other doctoral degree classifications have been explored such as for example, the Professional Doctorate in Fine Art (University of East London, University of Hertfordshire etc.), and Doctor of Arts (University of Sydney etc.).

⁹ *Working Together Towards Common Goals: Serving Through Research* is the title of the University of Regina’s Strategic Research Plan 2010 – 2015. <http://www.uregina.ca/research/assets/docs/pdf/Strategic-Research-Plan-Feb152011.pdf>

artistic research is not to bend towards a scientification of the artists' knowledge, but rather, a provocation towards re-visioning what and how we *know*.

It remains to be seen how the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission will re-shape architectures of knowledge in Canada, but already renovations are underway. In a recent announcement by the University of Winnipeg committing to the integration of indigenous ways of knowing into curricula¹⁰, Wab Kinew, Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Affairs acknowledges the role of education in advancing the process of reconciliation in Canada. To return finally to the two architectural examples, the rehabilitation of the Shingwauk Residential School and the excavation of the Bridgehead Building at the Linz Academy of Art, what both projects achieve is a liberation of concealed knowledge already *in our midst*. I suggest that it is by employing the methodological positions of research-creation, exemplified by Lowry's "creative-critical collaborations", Steyerl's "aesthetics of resistance", and Busch's provocative "wild knowledge" that we can begin to build a creative and academic home for all our ways of knowing.

Works cited

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¹⁰ See University of Winnipeg Press Release and statements by President and Vice Chancellor Dr. Annette Trimbee and Wab Kinew, Associate Vice-President, Indigenous Affairs *Indigenous Course Requirement Approved For 2016-17 School Year*: <http://news-centre.uwinnipeg.ca/all-posts/indigenous-course-requirement-approved-for-2016-17-school-year/> and CBC article *University of Winnipeg makes indigenous course a requirement*: <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/manitoba/university-of-winnipeg-makes-indigenous-course-a-requirement-1.3328372>

