Researchify: Artists’ Research as Disruption

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Abstract
My practice-based research explores what is invisible in the visual realm in order to investigate immanence, haptic perception, and non-visual knowledge. I approach the non-visible realm through video, animation, writing, installation, experimental collaboration, and drawing. Through this context, I ask: what is at stake in the recent shift in Canadian academic institutions for artists to define their work as artist-researchers? While this shift does suit the practice of many artists (myself included) it also carries a dangerous edge, a subtle implication that applying ‘research’ to art practice entails a more rational, articulable, or self apparent explanation of the function and value of art. The coined term “researchify” exemplifies this erroneous rational order. I argue that this urge to “researchify” is a dangerous tendency, and artists must protect the unutterable lacuna within their process. The leap of perception in the art experience remains fundamentally within experiencing the art itself. Art is an encounter that exists through the act of making and/or through the viewer’s experience, accessible through phenomenological investigation. I apply the basic tenets of Gilles Deleuze’s fold, Giorgio Agamben’s lacuna, and Laura U. Mark’s immanence of irreversible time to eschew rational over-determination.

Keywords
Artists’ research; immanence; encounter; phenomenology; Deleuze; Agamben; lacuna; Laura U. Marks.

Introduction: The Limits of Reason
As a contemporary interdisciplinary artist I use video, new media, animation, writing, installation, experimental collaboration, and drawing to investigate immanence, haptic perception, and non-visual knowledge. I have been drawn towards animation for its inherent ability to suggest the flight of the imagination, and to irritate the rupture between what is actual and what can be represented. Throughout my art practice I have been drawn to implicating what is non-visible in the visual realm. The unseen yet apparent is often the driving force in my work, and it manifests in different forms. My recent research Invisible Histories explores the unseen through site-specific media art in public venues. [1] I create interfaces, artworks and situations in which the public can engage with new media that addresses their physical place in the world.

This way of working allows me to connect an art experience to emergent technologies, and our very localized, specific, sensory ways of being in the world. People, technology, and the landscape combine in magical surprises.

The catchphrase ‘artist researcher’ fits my practice as my body of work has arisen through a critical engagement and theoretical reflection that results in the production of artworks. The thinking and making are inextricably linked by “research in and through art.” [2] As the term ‘artist researcher’ becomes a burgeoning category within academia, I am drawn to questioning the basic tenets of this shift. What fuels the expectation that artists can or must ‘researchify’ their practice? The term ‘researchify’ playfully and sardonically prods the question of how art is legitimized within academia. [3]

With the concept of ‘researchify’ I am referring specifically to a relatively recent shift (in Canada) in standards placed on artists teaching in universities to ‘researchify’ their practice. Artist research can be defined as both “research for art” (the range of practices that both inform and constitute artistic production) or “research through art” (where artistic practice becomes a vehicle for producing and presenting new knowledge).” [4] I am interested in the political stakes at play in the insistence to 'researchify.' Through this poetic reflection I aim to embrace, decry and celebrate the contradictions and complexities of artistic research methodologies. How does individual artists’ creative research play a role within this larger debate?
‘Researchify’ implies a rational order by which we justify creative outcomes. reasonable & senseless is the title of my twenty-channel video installation. [5] Each video channel shows footage of an historic, human made, disaster with an animated letter superimposed upon the footage. When the animated letters are read across the twenty channels they spell the title of the work. The phrase reasonable & senseless implies that pure reason itself is a senseless force exemplified in the human made technical disaster. This type of disaster is not an accident, but more of an inevitable conclusion to a series of steps. Given the limits of reason, and its senselessness, how might we articulate the way individual processes emerge through studio practice? Besides an imaginative intellect, what other types of knowledge are at play for artist researchers?

The Cult Of Efficiency

The shift from art practice to practice based scholarship suggests that to ‘researchify’ art making entails an attendant shift to a more linear or rational process. In the Massey Lecture, The Cult Of Efficiency, Janice Gross Stein observes that our current time is steeped in the cult of efficiency to such a degree we lose sight of the difference between what is efficient, what is efficacious, and what has lasting effect. [6] The act of creative making is not entirely knowable, and to present this process as fully articulable is to grossly misrepresent it. As an artist, my work is rooted in the traditionally poetic, and as David Jhave Johnston notes, this entails vulnerability, uncertainty, and epiphanies. [7] Embracing the irrational in art making takes us to surprising connections, linkages, and insights. To embrace the creative process, and to do it justice in writing, we cannot just blindly defend it, or attempt to fully define it but must cleave to a process that remains fundamentally outside of language. From my current experience within academia, I witness this uneven terrain between the cliché of inarticulate irrational genius, and extreme formal analysis, thus I am striving to define a more nuanced middle ground. Writing alongside my creative process demands poetic devices to articulate its terrain with any degree of precision. How do we bridge this space between the nuanced processes of sense making in practice with an entirely prescriptive act of telling? It is of utmost political importance for artist-researchers to privilege their ever emergent shifting studio work as a lacuna within the fixity of language, as a creative process that cannot fully enter into verbal coherence. The artistic medium of a works’ realization is its most precise articulation and cannot be simply transcribed into words.

My interactive video installation, and all watched over by machines of loving grace, is a collaborative work created with artist Ricarda McDonald. [8] The title is from a 1967 Richard Brautigan poem that suggests a loving, caring machine gaze watching over humanity. In the gallery two enormous video eyes follow the visitor as they enter the installation. The work questions the uncontrollable growth of surveillance by machine networks and the values of those systems. The installation confronts the viewer with a silent system of dominance, and hopefully, attains this with some absurd humour. This work exemplifies a recurrent idea in much of my artwork: the power of what is omitted, elided, invisible, or unutterable. Language, or rather, absent language, is often the driving force in my work. It is precisely this crux of what is un-representable that my creative process springs from. When I create absence as presence in my work, what is this elusive thing I attempt to locate?

Absence As Presence

In the exhibition announcement for Making is Thinking, at Witte de With Contemporary Art, curator Zoe Gray states that the process of thinking cannot and should not be fully stripped away from the process of making: “An increasing division between making and thinking has marked European society since the Industrial Revolution.” [9] If we refuse these binary ideologies such as concept and form we come to more productive outlooks. One such perspective is that there is a form of thinking inherent in making which can never be fully stripped from object-hood. The art object isn’t just a thing, it is a thing in flux. At times it is merely an expensive object, and at others, a deeply affective en-
counter charged with meaning, and most often, both at once. My consideration of both the act of making and our critical reflection must lead me to privilege the making or encountering the art object, not to abstractions such as merely reducing the logic of the object to its market value, literary condensation, or other mediations. We can’t sell, speak, or write away the art.

What might some productive models outside a division between making and thinking look like? What art making strategies encapsulate an intertwining of experience and modality? How might we be speaking within the synchronous mode of making? New forms begin to assert themselves such as simultaneous creation, exhibition, and discussion. In 2012 I was invited to present at an art lab by the hosts BADco, at Klub Mama, Multimedia Institute, in Zagreb, Croatia. [10] The BADco collective is comprised of five performers, dancers, choreographers, two dramaturges, and one philosopher. The central exploration for our gathering was the intersection between the agency of images, the performance of the body, and the apparatus of seeing. In the art lab model, the exhibition of work in progress is presented alongside the written and verbal considerations of the work. This conjuring allows for a phenomenological opportunity for investigating and negotiating layered meanings together. [11] It creates an open arena in which the improvisational and the written are equally present. As a group of experienced creators, we jointly confront creative struggles in a shared encounter. In opening to each other’s unfurling work we engage in a phenomenological co-creative trajectory. In this model, making and thinking are coterminous, integrating both critical and creative processes. In these shared encounters, openness is crucial.

Lacuna

Dahlberg typifies this aspect of openness as key to phenomenological research: “Openness is the mark of a true willingness to listen, see, and understand. It involves respect, and certain humility toward the phenomenon, as well as sensitivity and flexibility.” [12] The aim is to allow the phenomenon to present itself to us instead of us imposing preconceived ideas on it. As Finlay notes, this openness needs to be maintained throughout the entire research process not just at the start. [13] Furthermore, in teaching the process of studio research this openness must also be maintained. Perhaps co-creating the moment of research becomes the only ethical way in which we can teach that moment of creative unfurling, as it is as we encounter it in the studio: uncertain, barely perceived, in error, in omission, repressed, or barely visible and limping. Like other forms of phenomenological research, studio work cannot be simplified of its multivalent possibilities. Dahlberg notes “the best phenomenology highlights the complexity, ambiguity, and ambivalence of the participants’ experiences…. researchers need to be “careful not to make definite what is indefinite.”” [14]

To ‘researchify’ is to deny the complexity in which we are deeply embedded: as subjects we are never separate from the object of our creative study. As we near the object of our study, our process entails an inherent, inarticulate interface that is in fact our own lacuna, our own pre-cultural, pre-lingual selves, indivisible from its enmeshment with the world. Giorgio Agamben articulates this idea of the lacuna when he writes about the impossibility of testimony. For what testimony reveals at its core is “the non-language to which language answers, in which language is born.” [15] I press up against experience, against making, precisely because I cannot utter experience any more than I can utter what resides in my own non-language. The impossibility of mediating experience is the central idea in my single channel video the bell. [16] The work has a short, subtitled narrative that conveys the idea that although the nature of experience cannot be fully articulated, it sings out in our silence. The narrative revolves upon a song that is almost impossible to listen to, and yet the song moves towards articulation despite the impossibility of becoming fully divulged in that process. Perhaps the song is the very impulse to make art, to push up against the limits of representational systems.

Flow

Emphasizing the gap between representation and what cannot be articulated is a strategy to highlight our nature as a human subject, as a Deleuzian fold of “the outside folded in” and hence, “an immanently political, social, embedded subject.” [17] In this complexity our apprehension is also inherently misapprehension, and slippage is always entailed in the process of articulation, or art making. Here is where sense making in the studio exists, where creative bifurcations improvise previously unforeseen outcomes.

In Enfoldment and Infinity Laura U. Marks states that our primary relationship to perception is not to “measured time, but to lived, irreversible time” and that this relationship constitutes “a ‘re-enchantment of the world.’ This is true immanence. If time is irreversible, no law can predict the outcome of an experiment (such as life); instead, things in their particularity, and people too, bring about new states that could never have been imagined.” [18]

To ‘researchify’ is to artificially slash apart the myriad complexities of the creative process. The urge to ‘researchify’ is borne of an industrial model that has clear political agendas in the separation of concept and form. To cleave to the immanent is to refuse this separation between concept and form, to refuse an institutionalization of formal analysis that results in the dematerialization of the art object, the art form and the art process. The ink drawing, The Geometry of Meaning, clearly spoofs the ideological function of extreme formal analysis. [19] In a similar vein, Fredric Jameson notes a similar institutional “irrepressible urge to identify all thoughts with a named source.” [20]
When I bring my own strategies as an artist into the pedagogical process, I am challenged to sustain the gap between representation and what is unknowable. To sustain the lacuna, gaps, and slippage in the studio process is to present it whole. Otherwise I am locked into an artificial rank-structure as an expert who produces knowledge workers rather than being one of a collective in a creative response manifested through research, as I see it as exemplary of the type of integrated approach I am urging as an ethical response for the framing of artistic research and the teaching of art. It suggests a shift, from knowing to doing, from visuality to haptic engagement, from expertise to creatively exploring our collective not-knowing. This process, this shared flow, stands in contrast to the urge to ‘researchify’, which is essential stratification. Perhaps this is what ‘researchify’ best exemplifies: that institutions tend towards stratification through the reinvigoration of forms, of understandings, of practices, of definitions, of languages. We inhabit the creative response manifest through research, and are part of the process of ushering in new forms of research within the institution. It is our creative bifurcations that accompany this shift from stratification to flow.

References

3. A phrase coined by moderator Risa Horowitz (University of Regina) for the Universities Art Association of Canada (UAAC) Conference, on November 2, 2012, in Montreal, for the panel Disciplining Art Practice: Getting a Feel for the Game including Cliff Eyland (University of Manitoba), Tanya Mars (University of Toronto), Christof Migone (Western University) and Donna Szoke (Brock University).
10. BADco, Actionable Images, BADco website, accessed March 5, 2012. http://badco.hr/2012/03/05/actionable-image/

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