

Emme, M. (2007). Art-Based research/Research-based art: On Wonder and Rigour. *Canadian Review of Art Education*.34(1) 1-7.

This edition of CRAE began with an unanticipated meeting between myself and 4 Canadian artists at a conference of the Society for Photographic Education in Chicago. Drawn to several familiar names and ideas in the conference brochure, I was fortunate to attend a session by Bob Bean from the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Kathy Knight and Nina Levitt both from York University and Vid Ingelevic from the Ontario College of Art and Design. Together, these Canadian artists offered a panel that focused on their art processes as research. As an academic researcher trained in visual art, I (along with many of my colleagues across the continent) have been a part of the growth struggles of arts-based, or arts-informed research. Navigating academe as an artist or an art educator involves negotiating ironic minefields that seem to extend forever (or at least back to the Enlightenment).

Art-Based Research Research-Based Art

Given the terms ‘art’ and ‘research’ on the one hand and ‘expression’ and rigor’ on the other, the human tendency to organize might lead many to the mental matching of research with rigour and art with expression. These groupings clearly face each other to create a binary that echoes the mind-body dualism explored by Descarte (1641) and a centuries-long debate that positions both the arts and sciences in the academy in relation to our conceptualizations of meaning. While philosophies of mind and of science have seemingly moved on from Descarte’s position, Bracken and Tomas (2002) point out, as an example, how dualistic thinking continues to limit neurological medicine when drug-based and digital imaging therapies limit research and treatment to the brain as a physical thing. Their argument, which will resonate in the arts and educational research, is for a multidimensional model that recognizes the interactions between the mind, body and context as contributors toward an understanding of human health that includes meaning-making and identity building as dimensions along with the physicality of biological systems and symptoms. The residual effects of dualistic thinking has had implications across the academy and particular consequence for the arts, humanities and even the social sciences. While Descarte’s doubts combined with more contemporary, materialist philosophies have served the development and significant successes of modern scientific research, they have, perhaps until recently, played a part in the development of an academic hierarchy that values a particular notion of reason and measurability as rigor.

Madigan & Rigor

In Madigan’s (1986) *Modern Project to Rigor* he traces the narrowing definitions of reason and rigor whose beginnings he associates with Descarte’s philosophy and the Enlightenment and which finds a culmination in reason as abject doubt founded on Nietzsche’s *Will to Power*. Madigan mentions Descarte’s observation that ‘wonder’ is the only virtue for which there is no corresponding vice (p.204-205). Ironically, Descarte is a key figure in foregrounding wonder’s opposite, doubt as the essential strategy in reason

as intellectual inquiry. Madigan describes a growing tension that comes to understand "suspicion or doubt as the *only* reliable expression of freedom" (Madigan, p. 202) that seemingly finds a culmination in Nietzsche's philosophy. Where does one turn beyond absolute doubt? Madigan suggests that an important last/next step has been missed. The last stage of object doubt has to be doubt the centrality of suspicion itself.

The challenge is rather to develop a critically informed or educated 'reason' that is aware of its own tendency, not just to structure reality the way it would *like* to view things, but also to be impressed by a method that is successful in one privileged ('rigorous') area, and attempt to transfer this method and impose it on all areas. This is the origin of the 'totalitarian mind,' or mind of 'one idea,' a tendency to which the Enlightenment, impressed as it is by mechanistic science and technological success, is especially prone. Rather, it is a question of pushing rigor and adequacy together, of deciding in a critical way on the *appropriate* questions to ask about each subject, to embrace the notion of a *plurality* of methods, each suited to and growing out of the subject matter to be investigated. (Madigan, 1986 p.203)

This leads us back to a pre-modern notion of rigor, which is based, in part in wonder. Facing a world rich with people, places, things and ideas, all inter-engaged in impossibly complex ways, where do we direct our attention, and how do we organize ourselves to understand what we are experiencing? I would suggest that the openings arts-based researchers have created in contemporary academic practice¹, are an important example of the re-emergence of wonder as a reasonable response to questions in the academy.

In a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio broadcast on July 26, 2005, the late Jane Jacobs, an influential theorist on urban planning, spoke about the role that storytelling and anecdote play in social understanding. A writer with no degree or teaching position whose views on the livability of cities and on the humane responsibilities that come with affluence in society have guided city planners and presidents, Jacobs suggested that the human textures and openness to interpretation typical of anecdotal evidence were often a far more effective vehicle for communicating complexities like "city life" than were the distilled abstractions associated with scientific explanation (Emme & Kirova, 2006 p. 45)

In his important recent text, *Art practice as research: Inquiry in the visual arts*, Graeme Sullivan clarifies a key to the linkage between art and research with his focus on art practice (Sullivan, 2005, p.xv). He argues that, "informing theories and practices are found in the art studio, and the image of the artist-theorist as practitioner is taken as the locus of action rather than the arts teacher. Therefore, visual arts research has to be grounded in practices that come from art itself, especially inquiry that is studio based" (Sullivan 2005, p. xvii).

Ultimately, the purpose of this theme issue of CRAE is to undertake an exploration of artistic practice that understands itself as research. In accommodating and understanding the multidimensional possibilities of the concept of rigor, it is useful to think of

methodology as, in part, a consequence of context. If there are judgments of quality to make about a research, it must be guided by questions grown out of the researcher's practice. In the examples presented here, the evidence of practice is found in visual work, supported by artist's statements. In each of these cases, the flow is from the embodied visual engagements of looking and making, amplified later in text. In each example presented here, I see both of the elements that Madigan suggested are central to rigor after the end of modernist philosophy, wonder and criticality. Other researchers may find that their inquiry flows from a practice centered in teaching or the social sciences toward visual or expressive methods. The qualities of each research constitutes a unique convergence of method that requires that the researcher communicate their practice so that. In each case

The impulse to complicate human subjects research with performative, expressive and material representations has a recent and vital history. constructed analogues to

1.) Examples of Arts-based research communities include the visual and performed works of the a/r/t/ographers out of the University of British Columbia (Irwin & DeCosta, 2004, ???), the Arts-based research special interest group linked with (<http://aber-sig.org>) the American Educational Research Association, and the center for Arts-Informed research at the University of Toronto (<http://home.oise.utoronto.ca/~aresearch/airhome3.html>) are three of the more established gatherings.

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