

Art-Based Research / Research-Based Art

On Wonder and Rigour

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In *The Modern Project to Rigor* (1986), Patrick Madigan traces the narrowing of the concept of reason and rigor to Descartes's enlightenment philosophy which articulated a "preoccupation with freedom from error" that promised the reward of an improved future (Madigan p. 4). "The modern Enlightenment can be presented as preoccupied with a notion of salvation that gradually, "swings from an optimism about the possibility of life here on earth to a pessimistic, gnostic evaluation of our condition" (p.3) that Madigan suggests culminates in reason as abject doubt founded on Nietzsche's *Will to Power*. Madigan mentions Descartes's observation that 'wonder' is the only virtue for which there is no corresponding vice (p.204-205). In arguing for the place of wonder as an aspect of rigour, Madigan explores both the irony and structure of the philosophy of Descartes as a key figure in foregrounding wonder's opposite, doubt, as the essential strategy in reason as intellectual inquiry.

Art Historian, Barbara Stafford, has focused on the visual culture of 18th century Europe offers an important arts-based illustration of Madigans concern. It is her contention that

self-consciously systematic, ethical, and linguistic, the Enlightenment intensified Descarte's conviction that error was the greatest evil. Dedicated to the compulsive refashioning of the credulous and passionate self, it was precisely the pan-European critical and pedagogical movement that defined itself by mounting a methodical attack against all forms of psuedos, (281-282) [which lead to]...the reification of print-based language as the master paradigm for all serious signification and the stereotyping of non-verbal expression as belonging to the impulse ridden Unconscious. (Stafford, 1994, p. 284)

Returning to Madigan, he described a growing tension that came 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 abject doubt has to be doubting 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)

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 simply a biological system. Scanned tracings of electronic impulses in the brain can create a kind of aestheto/technological awe at what is really a mere snapshot of human complexity. Their argument, which will resonate in the arts and educational research (Springgay, 2008), is for a multidimensional and multimodal 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 external symptoms.

The residual effect 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. Arguably, the world of research, invested in symbolic systems based in word and number, are also susceptible, over time, to the magic thinking that mistakes familiar structure for reason that loses touch with concepts of adequacy. Vilém Flusser described this as the substitution of idolatry with 'textolatry' (Flusser, 2000). Duncum's recent call (2008) to maintain the tension between aesthetics and ideology in art education highlights the centrality of art educator's role at this converging point of image, text, and the human work of

crafting meaning. He adds further dimension to the need for art educators to complicate understandings of art, education and research both as they exist independently and in relation to each other.

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, regardless of whether the flow is from a research model to art practice, or from art practice to a research model, or something beyond this apparent opposition, the evidence of practice is found in visual work, supported by each artist’s critical reflections. A commitment to the convergence of rigorous art-making, rigorous research and rigorous design in the presentation of these complex ideas is the at the heart of art educators contribution to our complicated academics world of art, education and research. 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: each explores the tension between wonder and criticality. As explored by others, researchers may find that their inquiry flows from a practice centered in teaching or the social sciences toward visual or expressive methods. In a manner that reflects the contemporary shift from the historical to the geographic as a dominating metaphor for being, (Soja, 1989) others will come to recognize knowing as a simultaneous and complimentary mixture of image, word, body and context.

As viewers/readers of this research you are invited to enjoy the qualities of each effort. You are asked to judge the commitment and reflective self-awareness that constitutes each artist/researcher's central methodology as it is evidenced through the scope and craft of their visual work and their writing. As the guest editor and designer of this publication, I challenge you to both enjoy and critique how this work has been brought together. Art education digital and print academic publications have to be exemplars of inquiry into the place of art in the academy. In the end, you are called upon to recognize your own wonder and doubt as both a resource and method in your own research practice. Ideally, I hope that the new editor of *CRAE*, Richard Lachappelle, is faced with the delightful challenge of being overwhelmed by the diversity richness and critical contribution of work submitted to future issues of this publication.

Endnotes

- 1.) Examples of Arts-based research communities include the visual and performed works of the a/r/tographers out of the University of British Columbia (Irwin & DeCosta, 2004)(Springgay, S., Irwin, R.L., Leggo, C., & Gouzouasis, P. 2008), 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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