

# Thom Roberts Reads Crowns

## Musing on Art and Neurodiversity through the Lens of One Artist's Practice

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Article abstract

At Studio A, a supported studio for neurodiverse artists, the prolific painter, performer, photocopier, and installation artist Thom Roberts frequently reaches out to connect with friends and fellow artists by running his hands across the backs of their heads; “reading” their crowns. It’s a blessing I have been lucky enough to receive countless times over the course of my ethnographic engagement with Studio A, and as my relationship with Thom has developed. During my research, I have witnessed Thom read crowns in all kinds of contexts, from pubs to art galleries, in a performance artwork that could also be understood as an experimental artist talk. Here, I trace the narrative of this facet of Thom’s practice. I consider how such embodied encounters have the potential to open avenues of communication and connection between people who might experience the world in very different ways.

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## THOM ROBERTS READS CROWNS: MUSING ON ART AND NEURODIVERSITY THROUGH THE LENS OF ONE ARTIST'S PRACTICE

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**Chloe Watfern** is a writer, researcher, artist and PhD scholar. Her PhD is exploring how art works in two organisations that support neurodiverse artists and makers. With an academic background in art history and psychology, her interdisciplinary research spans the social sciences and the arts.

**Abstract:** At Studio A, a supported studio for neurodiverse artists, the prolific painter, performer, photocopier, and installation artist Thom Roberts frequently reaches out to connect with friends and fellow artists by running his hands across the backs of their heads; “reading” their crowns. It’s a blessing I have been lucky enough to receive countless times over the course of my ethnographic engagement with Studio A, and as my relationship with Thom has developed. During my research, I have witnessed Thom read crowns in all kinds of contexts, from pubs to art galleries, in a performance artwork that could also be understood as an experimental artist talk. Here, I trace the narrative of this facet of Thom’s practice. I consider how such embodied encounters have the potential to open avenues of communication and connection between people who might experience the world in very different ways.

**Keywords:** neurodiversity, ethnography, intellectual disability, performance art, supported studio

## A Beautiful Blessing

I can't stop looking at crowns – that area at the upper back of the head where hair tends to grow, if you have any, in a circular pattern known as a whorl. On the train, I move to the back of the carriage so that I can stare down the rows of seats at the curves and waves and spirals and ever-expanding patches that constitute the heads of strangers from behind. Sometimes, I wonder what they contain – those hair and skin and skull encased brains...

### Figure 1

*Thom Roberts with crown drawing, 2017.*



*Note: Photos courtesy of Studio A.*

When I first met Thom Roberts at Studio A, on the fourth floor of the Crows Nest community centre in an inner northern suburb of Sydney, we didn't shake hands. But he did, on multiple occasions, hold his palm across my crown and run his fingers through my hair, at other times using his thumbs to search through my whorl, where at one point he found a millipede. I found this a little confronting – here was someone I had just met touching me in a way I wasn't used to. But it was also soothing – I love my head being stroked, I find it incredibly relaxing and comforting. I think it was his way of taking my measure, of sussing me out.

As I have come to know Thom<sup>1</sup> more, I have learned that such gestures are a common part of his day-to-day interactions in the studio. Thom delights in finding different creatures in peoples' hair, or simply making a momentary connection as he rushes past on his way to and from his working space in a light-filled corner near a window. Emma Johnston, the principal artist at Studio A, has known Thom for over fifteen years and they have developed a lovely intimacy. She describes it as a "beautiful blessing" that Thom enacts in his encounters with his friends and fellow artists. It is a favour that she will return to him, a way of checking in, particularly if she notices him feeling edgy or out of sorts over the course of a day in the studio.

When I first met Thom at Studio A I was also introduced to his art. Thom is an artist in the truest sense of the word. He paints, he draws, he performs, he creates installations and interactive digital works. In a sense, his whole way of being in the world is art. And his art tends to spread. Photocopied pictures, sometimes cello-taped, faces marked up or rubbed out with thick marker pen, appear on almost every surface at Studio A. Portraits of people and trains – of people as trains and trains as people – are pinned to easels or rest on trestle tables. Yes, his art tends to spread. It spreads out of the studio too – into art prizes and installations, collaborations, and commissions.

The team at Studio A help make some of this happen. On the organisation's website it describes itself as tackling "the barriers that artists living with intellectual disability face in accessing conventional education, professional development pathways and opportunities needed to be successful and renowned visual artists."

## **Navigating Neurodiversity and Art**

Applying the label of intellectual disability to Thom does not do justice to the unique cognitive differences that permeate his experience of the world, inflected by his autism. Certainly, disability is not a word that he identifies with. Neither is autism. And he had never heard of the word neurodiverse before I put it to him, going over some slides I was preparing for a presentation of an earlier version of this article at an art conference in Melbourne. Thom is much more familiar, and happy, with the label "artist."

Nevertheless, as a scholar, I like the idea of neurodiversity, challenging as it does the divide between medical and social models of disability that have been long-debated in the disability studies literature (Shakespeare & Watson, 2001). The term, coined by Judy Singer in the early 1990s and adopted by a social and cultural movement largely pioneered by autistic self-advocates and activists, frames autism as a neurological variation that produces distinct, sometimes atypical ways of thinking and interacting with

the world that can manifest quite differently in different individuals and which are part of a wider spectrum of variation in the human experience (Singer, 2016). In the words of autistic artist Jon Adams (2015):

Strictly speaking ‘neurodiversity’ should embrace all human variations that have the potential to enrich society as ‘biodiversity’ does our planet. We need people who think radically differently or perceive the world in a totally different way but often difference can be scary. (para. 20)

As a catch-phrase, neurodiversity has come to encompass a way of reframing all kinds of intellectual and cognitive disabilities or disorders to take into account both the benefits and difficulties of difference, while emphasising “the fact that there is no normal brain or mind” (Armstrong, 2015, p. 2). Erin Manning’s (2016) enquiries into neurodiversity frame it as a radical challenge to a neurotypical identity politics that is rarely named as such. She asks:

When do we question what we mean by independence, by intelligence, by knowledge? When do we honor significantly different bodies and ask what they can do, instead of jumping to the conclusion that they are simply deficient? (p. 4)

Embracing a spectrum of minds, and their complex forms of interdependence, can deepen our sense of the possibilities and potentials of the human experience. This has very real political implications. In a society where cognitive differences are poorly understood at best, stigmatised and discriminated against at worst, it is important to consider how meaningful encounters can occur between people with diverse experiences of the world, and what role art might play here.

As a researcher, I’m interested in how neurodiversity is navigated, both in the day-to-day happenings at Studio A, and as art, and artists, meet the public through exhibitions and other forms of engagement. As an “*ethnographer*,” I’m using the nebulous practices of participant observation and conversation to perform what Clifford Geertz (1998) once described as “deep hanging out” (also see Walmsley, 2018)<sup>2</sup>. I’m doing this in the hope of “offering an account,” to people like you who are reading my words today (Ingold, 2014, p. 386).

### **Which Brings me Back to Crowns...**

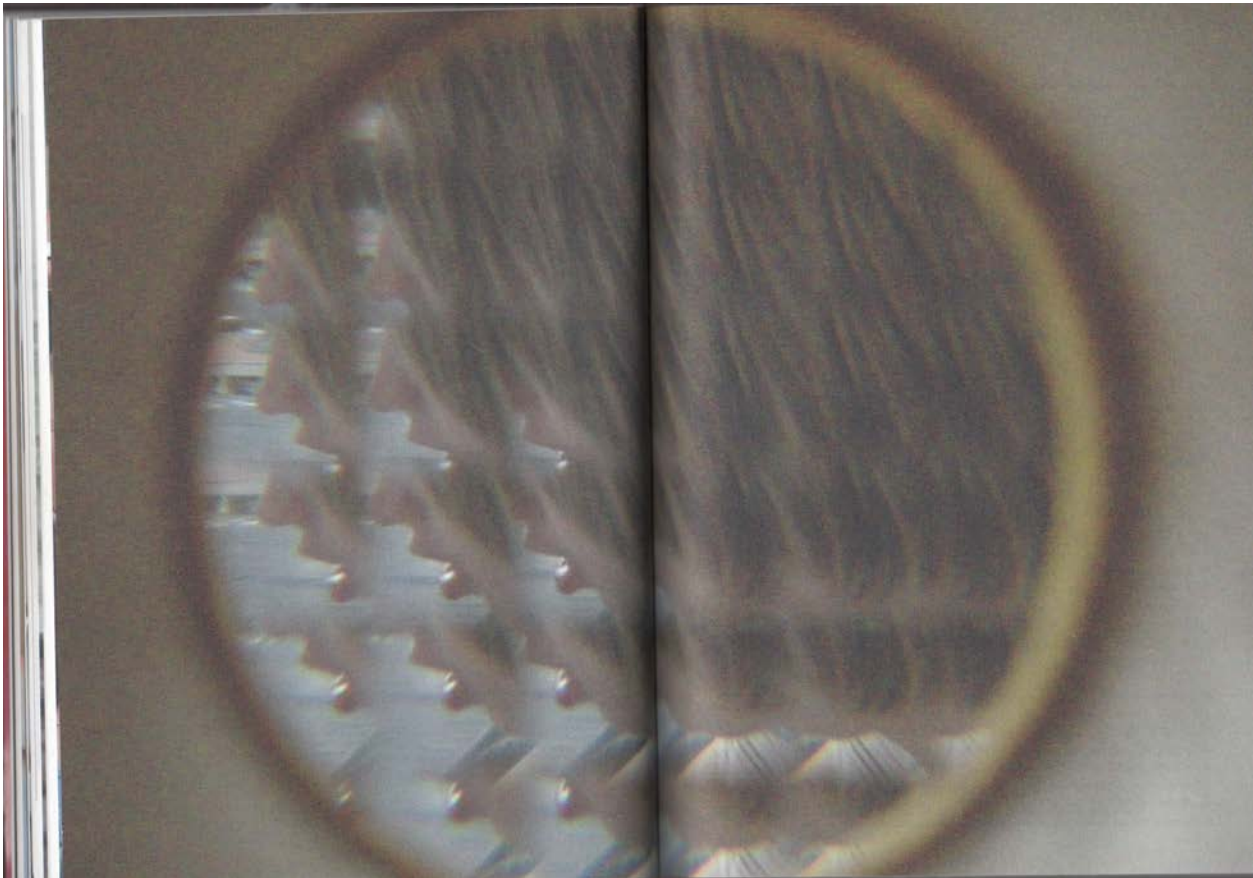
I like crowns heaps  
I like crowns most  
I like tiny holes

Millions of holes  
Millions of holes in your head  
There are tiny squares  
With my magic eye.  
(Roberts, 2009)

No-one can remember when exactly Thom's fascination with crowns began. It may have all started with a kaleidoscope. In a photograph from 2008 we look with Thom down his magic eye at hair fragmented into patterns, into millions of holes. Thom no longer has the kaleidoscope, but he still very much likes crowns.

## Figure 2

*Thom Roberts, Crown Through the Magic Eye 1, 2008<sup>3</sup>*



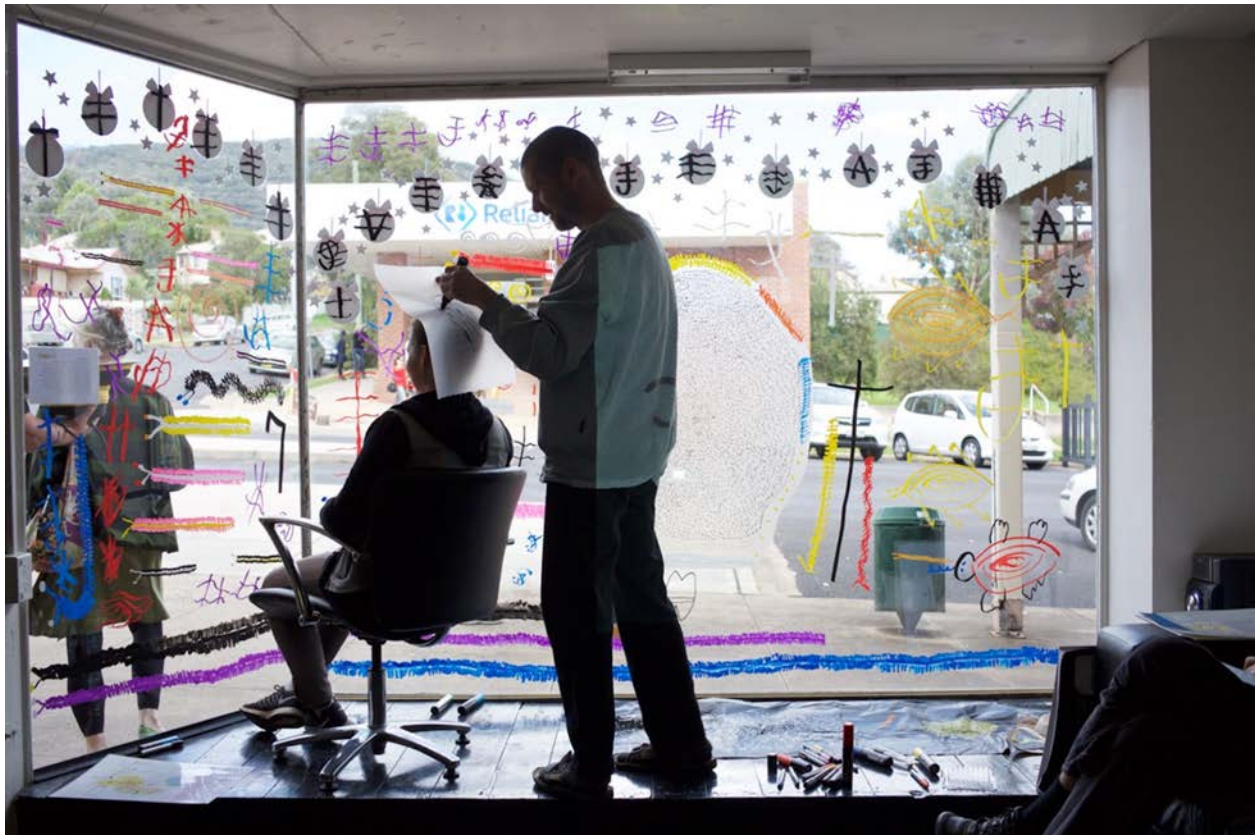


Since I've known him, Thom has found quite a few different things in my crown, including but not limited to: holes, a millipede, a car, a horse's body, a cow's body, a cockroach, a spider.

Since I've known him, I've seen Thom "read" crowns in quite a few different places including but not limited to: the studio, a pub, a children's festival, an art gallery. Sometimes this act was brief and fleeting, a simple hand to head. Other times, it was more protracted. Depending on the context, it could be an "experience" for the public to engage in. It could be an "artist talk." It could be "performance art."

### Figure 3

*"Positive and Negative of Thom Roberts" installation at Kandos Cuts Colours n Curls during CEMENTA, April 2017.*



*Note:* Photo courtesy of Studio A.

The first time Thom read crowns as performance art it was at the Kandos Cuts, Colours N Curls hairdressing salon during CEMENTA 2017, a contemporary arts festival in a rural town a few hours' drive out of Sydney. On the shopfront window, a large-scale

drawing of Thom's own crown was digitally animated with a choreographed dance of millipedes. The whole space was covered with his marks. And then, people sat down in an ancient barber's chair in the window as Thom proceeded to touch, then trace, then turn their heads into drawings of animals. "Crown portraits," Thom calls them.

I wasn't at the Cuts, Colours N Curls salon back in 2017, but the form of this performance has remained similar as it has travelled through many different venues. First, Thom spends a few moments running his hand across his participant's crown; some people require longer reads, while others are done in seconds. Next, on a sheet of tracing paper held over his participant's head, Thom makes a series of lines with a marker, literally tracing the hair of the crown. The paper is then clipped to an easel and Thom turns the crown reading into an animal, or collection of animals, that may or may not resemble his sitter.

### Thom's Participants

In a quieter corner of a bustling inner-city pub, I watched as Thom performed his crown reading during a corporate function. From my shady couch by the bar, or lingering near Thom's easel and chair, I tried to map the ripples of communication or connection that might have occurred between Thom and his somewhat boozy audience. In this strange setting, with people largely unversed in performance art or social practice, least of all disability arts, there was a degree of awkwardness and even misunderstanding (Bishop, 2012; Eisenhauer, 2007; Helguera, 2011; Sutherland, 1989). I saw clumsy touches, averted eyes. One woman was brought to tears by her drawing – a herd of black horses. She opened up to me about her family difficulties, her son's deep depression. For her, the crown reading was like a palm reading or meeting with a psychic.

Since then, I've watched many crown readings and spoken to the people who've experienced them, in all kinds of contexts. Some people do seem to think that Thom is really *seeing* them through his performance; that he is somehow peering into their minds through the back of their heads. Is this the trope of the autistic as *savant* playing itself out (Arnold, 2013)? Dare I say it, does Thom's crown reading begin to err into the realm of "freak show"? "Step right up, step right up, have your crown read by Thom Roberts, autistic genius."

Certainly, participants like to ponder the significance of their animal. A bear: nickname since high school. A bee: feeling like a worker drone. An ibis: "well, I do like to eat a lot of junk food." But most people laugh, with Thom, when they see his interpretation of them; one that they realise has been driven by the abstraction of a few



lines traced from the hair on the back of their head, and not by some mystical vision. A young man summed it up well: “I felt that it was just an exploration that could have gone anywhere, and I was going on this journey with him.”

#### Figure 4

*Thom Roberts reads a crown at Studio A, November 2018*



*Note:* Photo by Chloe Watfern.

Something else that happens in these performances is that people feel *cared for*, or perhaps *attended to*. People with intellectual disability are often cast in the *cared for* role; as the recipients of care (Rapley, 2004). So, a gymnastics coach explained to me that in the past she has only really had interactions with people with intellectual disability or autism when she was providing them services, “but it was different this time because I was, for want of a better term, in the passenger seat.” Here, Thom was providing a service to her.

But what is the “service”? Well, I know I feel cared for as Thom drums his fingers along the parting that runs from my double cowlick almost all the way back to the tight little bun I always have at the nape of my neck. It is something about the intimacy of

touch, then the sound of posca pen on paper, the way the paper curls over your eyes so you can't see out, if only for a second at most.

"It feels a lot like you're about to get something *done* to your body," one woman told me. "As women," she continued, "we are very used to having things done to our bodies because we opt into those experiences, like going to the hairdresser, going to the nail salon, going to get our nethers plucked or whatever. But this was really nice to have someone just gently touching my head."

Yet, it goes beyond touch, and it's not exactly a service either. It doesn't feel transactional, although there is an exchange of sorts. For one, the participant is gifted their crown portrait at the end of the "reading."

We know from our anthropological elders that the gift has its own powerful hold on the social fabric of a community, creating networks of mutual obligation between the giver and receiver (Mauss, 1954). In turn, a lineage of artists have seized upon the potential of the gift as an act of transgression, one that can create conditions of reciprocity between people within constructed encounters (Sansi, 2014). In both traditions, we can understand the gift as a thing that comes about in relation. And here, as Thom reads crowns, the whole encounter is a gift – a gentle, funny, sometimes confusing blessing – for the receiver.

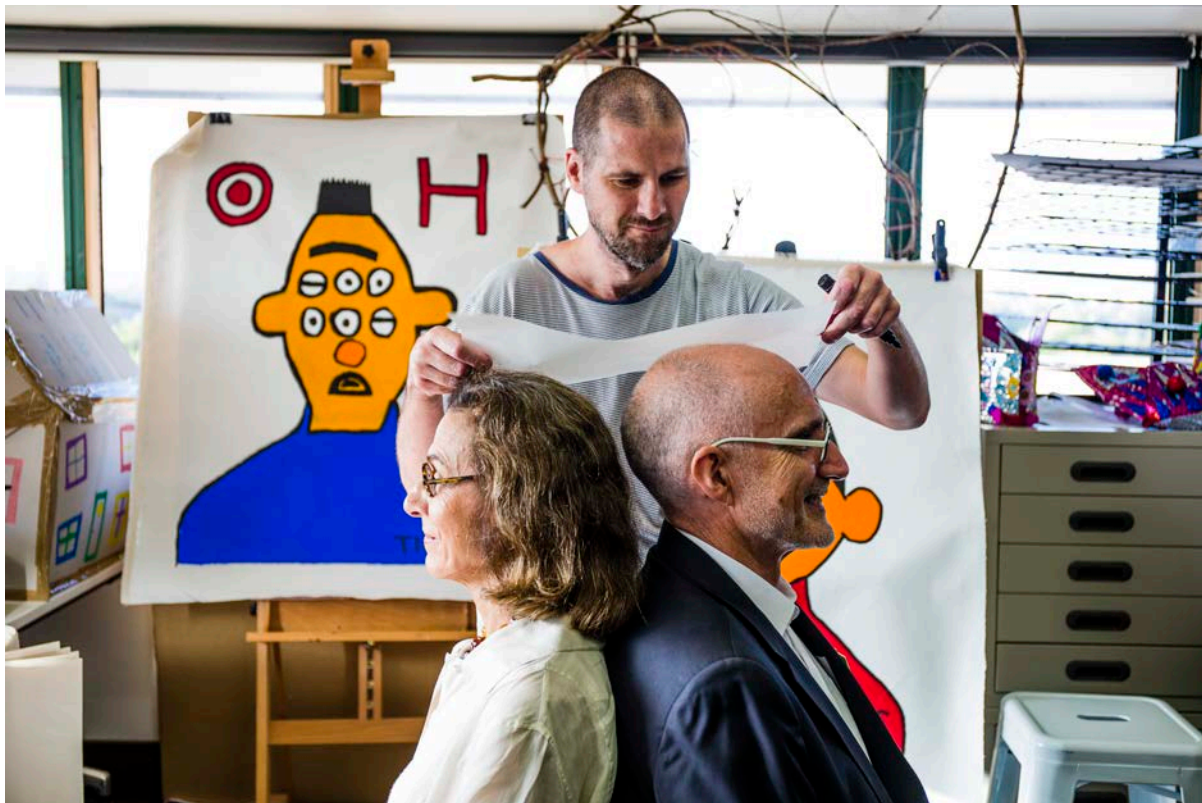
Not service, but gift. Not transaction, but encounter... Theories of encounter have begun to make their way into disability studies, with a recent Australian study developing a "typology of encounters" between people with and without intellectual disability in community settings (Bigby & Wiesel, 2019). Thom's performance might fit into what these researchers term a "convivial encounter" that creates momentary, shared identification between people – an example Bigby and Wiesel (2019) provide is of two people realising that they are fans of the same football team. But it goes well beyond shared identification.

As the giver of the gift, as the artist, Thom exerts his own unique power within the social dynamic of this performance. And if the supplicant is lucky, they receive more than a drawing of a bear, a bee, or an ibis; more than the physical tracing on paper: rolled up, sticky-taped, and handed to them to do with as they will. They receive a moment of insight into Thom's creative process: his delight, his disinhibition, his talent. "When I see Thom doing this," a participant confided in me, "I recognise there's a sense of him having assurance about who he is and what he is through the doing. And that reaffirms to me the importance of creativity in each of us."

Witnessing Thom's creativity can be both liberating and inspiring. Another artist, crown freshly read and recovered from a big chesty laugh, sighed heavily: "Now I can't wait to go home and face my blank canvas, so to speak."

### Figure 5

*Thom Roberts performing "Couple Crown Reading" at Studio A Love Launch, February 2018.*



*Note: Photo courtesy of Document Photography.*

## Other Ways of Knowing

When does Thom's crown reading stop being "performance art" and start being an "artist talk"? As I've already said, the distinction is probably immaterial. But it does raise something important – as a person who understands and expresses verbal language quite differently from the average neurotypical, the crown reading creates an opportunity for Thom to interact with his audiences in a way that he naturally gravitates towards in the studio.

Thom isn't interested in, or even perhaps able to, deliver an artist talk like the ones we are accustomed to encountering in public programs across the world. You know the type? Where the artist describes their process, their influences, how using material x helped challenged perception y. In his seminal paper on studios that support artists with intellectual disability, the art historian Colin Rhodes (2008) asks: "what if you are committed to the vocation of artist, but can't easily engage, or engage at all, in that system of discourse in normative ways?" (p. 129).

Thom's crown reading might provide one, highly personalised, answer to that conundrum. As I've already noted, for participants and onlookers, seeing Thom work is a demonstration of his focus, his skill, his way of working: "It's just the joy of making," said one woman after her crown was read in a university art gallery. "There's dedication. But also this sense of abandonment. You can see he's lost in doing the thing, and there's the focus but when he's finished it's on to the next." What's more, the way Thom sees animals in heads is somewhat like the way he sees, for example, trains as people and people as trains – it provides an insight into his very unique vision of an animated, interconnected world.

In my own research journey, I have been learning to open myself up to other ways of knowing – about Thom and his work, through Thom and his work. When, back in 2018, I sent through a long list of questions that I had about Thom's crown reading, Gabrielle Mordy (Studio A's artistic director) suggested that I ask Thom to *perform* the answers. So, while Gabrielle and I sat around the kitchen table at Studio A grasping at histories and implications, Thom read our crowns.

"What is it? What is it? What made these holes in your head? What is it? What is it? Who made these holes?" Thom asked in a sing-song voice as he looked through my hair. I don't know what the holes are that he saw, or *how* he sees them. There is so much I don't know, but this not knowing is something that I am learning to sit with and look at. A bit like looking at the back of a head, not knowing what face a person is making on the other side.

But this is also where the Studio A staff come in, again. While I grapple with my neurotypical expectations about communication, trying to elicit words that can explain the meaning of certain images or actions, Gabrielle has filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge. This speaks to a large part of her role, which involves mediating between artists and the public – framing or translating the work (and life) of artists like Thom for different audiences. So, at the crown readings that I have observed, while Thom works away more or less silently, a Studio A staff member will often be chatting to people waiting their turn; fielding questions about Thom, acting as his representative, even his voice. Sometimes, I've even found myself stepping into this role. It feels uncomfortable



**Figure 6**

*Hands on Thom Roberts' crown, November 2018.*



*Note:* Photo by Chloe Waffern.

at times. Certainly, in writing this paper, in working on my thesis in its overwhelming entirety, I am deeply aware of the issue of representation, of presenting the work of artists like Thom to others in a way that rings true, that doesn't usurp the clear voice that he articulates in everything that he does.

This framing or translation of Thom's practice is also something that needs to be accounted for when considering how work by artists like Thom could be co-opted into the political cause of neurodiversity that I outlined earlier: creating genuine understanding and dialogue between people who may have profound cognitive differences. Kester's (2004) work on dialogue in socially engaged art provides a solid starting-point for thinking this through, particularly as he points towards ways that discursive exchanges "can acknowledge, rather than exile, the nonverbal" (p. 115). However, there is still much work to be done to understand how different modes of discourse are negotiated in practices emerging from supported studios – what kinds of



conversations are facilitated; between who? How can the well-travelled dilemma of “giving voice” be complicated (Ashby, 2011)?

## **The Unknowable**

As always, there are many questions left unanswered. And that’s probably the way it should be. Because where would art be without a little bit of the unknown?

If I’m going to conclude, let it be to say that what makes Thom’s crown readings so compelling to me is the metaphorical potential of this act – of reaching out to another person, whether friend or stranger, and making contact, hand to head. In the end, that may be the closest any of us can get to approaching the mystery that is the consciousness of another human being.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Eschewing the convention in scholarly articles to refer to an artist by their surname, I choose here to talk about “Thom.” I do this for a number of reasons. Firstly, Thom Roberts’ birth name is Robert Smith. He has renamed himself Thom Roberts, just as he renames many other people in his life (but that’s another story). In the studio, I began to call Thom “Mr. Roberts” as a form of endearment, but quickly realised he didn’t like me calling him this. Thom wants to be called Thom, or Thom Roberts, not Roberts. Secondly, staying true to my ethnographic methodology – “being in the scene that’s pulsating, not separating what’s out there or in us” (Berlant & Stewart, 2019, p 28) – I believe that the use of first names helps convey the intimacy I have developed with many of the artists and staff at Studio A, including Thom.

<sup>2</sup> This research has received ethics approval from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee (HC1806027).

<sup>3</sup> Excuse the crease; the original photograph can’t be located, so this one has been scanned from a book (Boccalatte & Jones, 2009). However, I do kind of like that the crease here looks like a hair parting...