

The New Spirit of Creativity: Work, Compromise, and the Art and Design University

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BOOK REVIEW

THE NEW SPIRIT OF CREATIVITY: WORK, COMPROMISE, AND THE ART AND DESIGN UNIVERSITY

REVIEWED BY

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Liinamaa, S. (2022). *The New Spirit of Creativity: Work, Compromise, and the Art and Design University*. University of Toronto Press. Pages: 240. Price: CDN 44.95 (hardcover).

I received a physical copy of *The New Spirit of Creativity: Work, Compromise, and the Art and Design University* by Saara Liinamaa for review, which allowed me to appreciate its material qualities. The title, displayed in a simple sans-serif font, sits atop a gouache painting by east coast Canadian artist Miyoshi Kondo (2021). The painting, *The Art of Antiquating*, depicts art-making tools arranged in a conveyor belt-like form on power lines. The attention to detail in the book's design, featuring artwork by Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University alumna Miyoshi Kondo and jacket design by Will Brown, foreshadows the originality and thought-provoking nature of the text.

The New Spirit of Creativity is based on interviews, participant observation, policy and planning documents, and media from three Canadian art and design universities (Emily Carr University of Art + Design, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design University, and the Ontario College of Art and Design University). Liinamaa carefully considers how the precarious position of artistic work and even universities in general across Canada has impacted the practice, recognition, and awards of creativity and argues that “we are currently witness to a ‘new spirit’ of creativity, one that both converges with and diverges from key aspects of artistic creativity” (p. 4). She has offered an impressive and original text on the understudied and poorly understood art and design university in Canada against a backdrop of the broader higher education institute in crisis.

The book contains an introduction, seven chapters in two sections, and a conclusion. The first section, “Creativ-

ity, Critique, and the Art School,” delivers essential background information, definitions and terms, and a thorough and stimulating context to the reader including that the Canadian art and design university is “even more vulnerable to the changing tides of government, policy, funding, and public discourse than comprehensive universities due to its small size (all fewer than 5000 students), its relatively new university status, and poor public understanding of its mandate” (p. 14). The second section, “Everyday Work at Imagination University,” discusses findings from Liinamaa’s 54 interviews and fieldwork.

In *The New Spirit of Creativity*, readers confront the growth and evolution of artistic research culture, rise and effects of audit culture on creativity, changing demands for institution-serving creative identities, changes in employment security and creative currency, and an uncertain future of creativity and the art and design university. While acknowledging increasing anti-academic and anti-culture public sentiments; an ongoing pandemic; and an uncertain future for the arts, cultural work, academics, and artists, Liinamaa threads a consistent narrative that despite such challenges, creativity persists.

One intriguing example of what is to be encountered in these 240 pages is how artists and scholars in the Canadian art and design university fall within a broad spectrum of preferring and possessing doctoral degrees and arts-based academic scholarship, or master’s degrees in fine art and outstanding artistic portfolios. Liinamaa reveals that in the art and design university, faculty may be cast as “too aca-

demic” (p. 106), and how the institutional culture historically celebrates scholarship and artistic achievements that are embraced by a community or general audience. She highlights how art and design universities foster institutional relationships with the public by beautifying their host cities with their architecturally interesting campus buildings and nurturing frequent public art offerings by students and faculty.

Liinamaa underscores how the new spirit of creativity confounds existing pressures and conflicts, further positioning art and design university scholars as uniquely balancing a curriculum vitae, artistic portfolio, and reputational artistic teaching process. However, she remarks on how the intolerance of what is referred to as boring scholarship, combined with ongoing skepticism of academia and audit culture fortify an institutional culture of resistance to infringement on creativity and conformity in the Canadian art and design university that invites “counter-performances of artistic critique that can destabilize and reassemble meaning and protect artistic creativity and identity” (p. 123). Altogether, *The New Spirit of Creativity* makes for a provocative critique of audit culture and its effects on creativity, or, the creation of a whole new spirit of creativity with its own demands.

With great dexterity, Liinamaa provides a nuanced exploration of outputs, creativity, success, and scholarship within an art and design university “where being creative is something managed, cultivated, and contested at all points by faculty and administration” (p. 15). She makes no attempt to surprise readers with the contents of her book and has employed her title, cover, and names of sections and chapters to clearly signal to the reader what she sets out to accomplish. Nevertheless, I was delightfully surprised at the book’s originality across several areas. One novel argument is that the current higher education landscape’s demands for compromise not only diminish, but sometimes fuel, creativity. Liinamaa’s critique of creativity is equally as intriguing, which she describes as “inseparable from questions of status, elitism, and gatekeeping” (p. 7). Her questions, then, “Who gets to be creative? How is it evaluated? How does this align with existing fault lines of difference?” (p. 4), are deepened by the reader’s obligation to simultaneously deconstruct notions of creativity and equity that she explores with refreshing marvel.

Liinamaa examines the effects of institutional whiteness, racism, and audit culture on increasing institutional surveillance and barely veiled discrimination, especially towards untenured, racialized women faculty. The pressure on women, in particular, to conform, contort, and perform

creativity to serve the institution is addressed at length in Chapter Five, “Performing at the ‘Shit Show’.” Since Liinamaa raises how in higher education “the prominence of sexual harassment and violence remains understudied and poorly addressed” (p. 11) in her introduction and writes with bravery and sincerity, I found myself anticipating a discussion on gender, sexual harassment, and creativity in higher education that never arrives. A second minor critique is that, at times, the binary between art and design university scholarship and arts and humanities scholarship at comprehensive institutions appears too firm. I worry that throughout her comparisons, Liinamaa slightly dismisses the creativity, public scholarship, and resistance to neoliberalism and audit culture within higher education across the comprehensive landscape.

Saara Liinamaa, has demonstrated remarkable attention to detail as a researcher, writer, and creative. *The New Spirit of Creativity: Work, Compromise, and the Art and Design University* is a critical and inspired piece of art and I thank Liinamaa for its thoughtful delivery and important and exciting contributions to the field of Canadian higher education.

References

- Kondo, M. (2021). *The art of antiquating*. [Gouache on paper]. Private collection of Saara Liinamaa, Guelph, Canada.