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Art Education Resiliency: Co-generatively in a Community of Practice

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Article abstract

Art/Design Education Resiliency: Co-generatively in a Community of Practice is a co-authored dialogic/dialectic conversation among co-founders of the Creative Research Inclusive Practices (CRIP) Lab located at OCAD University. Founders are Pam Patterson, Faculty of Art, and School of Graduate Studies, OCAD U; Roman Romanov, Faculty of Design, OCAD U; and Matt Hawthorn, Head Design, University of Derby. The three have named their collective research practice as a form of snorkelling[1]! They swim the surface of discourse in play, deep diving into projects or exhibitions when paradoxical or multi-positional situations arise. It is a critical and yet deeply pleasurable discursive practice.

Roman Romanov

Roman is an internationally experienced architect, artist, illustrator and educator with an ocular disability based in Toronto, Canada. He is a sessional faculty member at OCADU, as well as a member of the Rick Hansen Foundation's instructional team, offering the Rick Hansen Foundation Accessibility Certification training at Laurentian University. He is a member of Waterfront Toronto's Accessibility Advisory Committee, the founder and principal of Linear Nonlinear Inclusive Design, a bilingual accessible design practice in Toronto, as well as co-founder of CRIP Lab at OCADU.

Matt Hawthorn

Matt Hawthorn is an artist and creative educator based in the UK and a co-founder of CRIP Lab at OCADU. Currently employed as Head of Design at the University of Derby, his work as an educator has focused on the scaffolding of students as creative research practitioners through an enabling curricula which challenges established perceptions, patterns and social norms. Matt's work as an artist focuses on playful and critical environments and reconsideration of landscapes and cityscapes through creative interventions.

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Art/Design Education Resiliency: Co-generatively in a Community of Practice is a co-authored dialogic/dialectic conversation among co-founders of the Creative Research Inclusive Practices (CRIP) Lab located at OCAD University. Founders are Pam Patterson, Faculty of Art, and School of Graduate Studies, OCAD U; Roman Romanov, Faculty of Design, OCAD U; and Matt Hawthorn, Head Design, University of Derby. The three have named their collective research practice as a form of snorkelling[1]! They swim the surface of discourse in play, deep diving into projects or exhibitions when paradoxical or multi-positional situations arise. It is a critical and yet deeply pleasurable discursive practice.

The following is a co-authored dialogic/dialectic conversion. This conversational writing intends to act as a forum to illustrate our research and co-practice as artists, designers, and researchers in education.

Figure 8. CRIP Lab international meeting in the Red Room, Open Gallery, OCAD University. Red vibrant room with people standing or seated on chairs, in wheelchairs, using ASL. Some are masked, some not, talking together. Photo by Joanna Black.

[1]CRIP Lab founders devised the term snorkeling in referring to their CRIP Lab research activity. This was in response to a recent University Affairs commentary, *In academia, we need two types of researchers: divers and surfers* by Tejas Pandya (Jan/Feb 2023). They felt that they were neither divers (overspecialized "experts") nor surfers (broadly exploring across disciplines) but rather they, as a group, sat somewhere in between. They look beneath the surface and come up for air!

PP: I was trying to remember recently how we came to form this lab, or even how we decided to name it as a lab. I think this evolved out of a Facebook Messenger conversation that we had, Matt about the possibility of generating an exhibition exchange which would bring your daughter's disability-related artwork here to Canada and then allow the show to return to the UK.

Somehow, disability became foregrounded in this conversation. Similarly, with you, Roman, we had formed a connection through the Disability Caucus and given this, we reached out to each other after I had left the Caucus. This meant that disability was already identified as a focus. What followed though was an incredibly exciting time.

Over the first months, we identified disability discourse as one key area requiring attention. How could this be tested within our lab community and across the larger institutional communities in which we worked?

I appreciated the attention we paid to this discourse analysis drawing from our individual locations as artist (PP), designer (MH), and architect (RR). Using these differing locations as referents, we mucked about with the different tasks such as lab naming. We valued an interdisciplinary interplay.

Ideas were developed and often derived from our various influences and practices but also from this conversation-in-relation. This process provided me - and continues to provide me - with some surprising moments of learning. It may be that our common commitment to disability creative practice aligns us but it is our unique differences that challenge us.

We have so little context as we work together here. Meaning that we are establishing this collaboration or working group or whatever it will be with no preconceived notions of what a disability lab should be. Rather, we are open to how our unique interpretations can shape it.

It seems that when there is little context provided to structure or define, we are freer to be creative and to value a range of understandings. It was a radical idea introduced in relation to aesthetic seeing and apprehending back in the 70s by John Berger. He challenged the "expert" model of art appreciation and understanding and summoned one which shattered this dominance. In this writing, he draws on Walter Benjamin's 1935 essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* arguing that in reproducing a painting, for example, context is severed from that which existed at the time of making. Berger (1972) notes, the act of reproducing an image inherently adds a subjective value to the image. Here, as we reproduce and reshape ideas, we also increase the subjective value of each idea. It becomes richer, more complex, less fixed. This seems to speak to how we might in fact be challenging the very institution(s) of art itself.

MH: We alighted on Lab as a pluralistic and necessarily ill-defined definition of a community of practice, also because it is prefigured on doing, experimenting, and action. However, I think defining institutions and context is very significant here. Institutions of art, education, practice which have a problematic overlapping with communities of practice, which is the hidden conflict within Pam's essay. So much of this hangs on the visible (what we name) and the invisible (what we ignore). The naming of CRIP, Creative Research Inclusive Practices, is an act of division like every gesture of naming, determining what is to be considered inside or outside.

In *Theory of the Avant Garde*, Peter Burger (1984) speaks of the Institution of Art, defined by the boundary between art and outside. Burger's institution is a shifting phenomenon, constantly redefining its boundaries to include that which is appropriable. Art, and by extension design and all creative practices find an articulation within the Creative and Cultural Industries (the postmodern articulation of Burger's Institution of Art), through their definition of exceptionality. That added "extra-daily" magic which separates them from the ordinary ugliness of the everyday, that I think is the essence of the professional as Pam is describing it here.

Crip in this context is a curious term, in many respects the new "Queer", a reappropriation of the ugly, especially the unheroic ugly, but by whom and for whom. Within the CRIP Lab the question of "I identify as…" becomes highly problematic amongst a community of practitioner educators who have found much delight and respect in their mutual introductions and reintroductions of difference to each other. Is it disabling to be from Iran, one of the richest cultures in the world? Is it disabling to be a carer, a mutually powerful and productive relationship following Nel Noddings seminal work *An Ethic of caring and its implications for instructional arrangements* (1988), what is a

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teacher if not a carer? This question of definition, categorisation, and appropriation, results in a hesitation before using the term Crip in our identity, even among those of us who are disabled – with disabilities, neuro-, and of course the "horror" of our malfunctions and malformations; accidents of birth, development, or experience.

Each online lab meeting begins with a land acknowledgement, an important and significant act which is also problematic and for me as an ethnic English, sitting in a different time and space where ancestry/blood and land/soil evokes different memories and guilts. Where often Roman is sitting in Israel which is the time, space, and context at the nexus of almost all global spatial guilt. More so than the naming of ancestry of land, the acknowledgement is that of an ancestry of ideas, social practices, and contexts. That our distinctiveness comes from the everyday context with its deep problematics, discriminations, aggressions. Rustom Bharucha (1997) reinforces this centrality of context, of creative practice being located in the local everyday practice and economy. He cites this within a description of a "cross-disciplinary" event performed by Indian performers from multiple traditions for a global elite audience in a place created from the destruction of a working class culture. The result according to Bharucha is an exercise of domination of the "clean professional" (my phrasing) which decontextualises / decontaminates the dirty everyday of human, economic, and environmental realities and is ultimately where the practice of art, design, and architecture, and indeed the practice of education reside.

So to return to the act of naming. Why reduce the complexity of the everyday to a word, an appropriation, not dissimilar to the "queering of everything". That is the danger here for us I think. Institutions appropriate through de-contextualisaton and re-contextualisation. A redrawing of the boundary as an act of authority. How do we name and define a lab as a community of practice and also as an institution within multiple institutions which we seek to challenge and critique. Pam, you introduced me to the concept of "curricking" a term which you took from drama educator Richard Courtney (1992). I like to think of this term as analogous to syncopation which is pertinent here in our relationship to the Institutions of Education and Art as they provide a beat or scaffold which moves us forward but also opens up moments of improvisation where we puncture the boundaries and allow in the everyday contamination.

Our meetings are often transcribed using the Microsoft Teams transcription service. Here the curiosity of Crip emerges. The transcription recognises Crip as a swear, replacing the letters with "****", like the beep in the days when we consumed discourse through radio and television, it speaks to the invisibility of that which we wish to make visible. I've become a bit obsessed with this, it seems to me to be the machine opening up our discourse to inclusion. What is more inclusive than wordlessness? The other thing it does is affirm Crip as a swear, in a different context an act of commitment, an oath. If the CRIP Lab is anything it is an act of commitment, a swear in this context too, a commitment to inclusion of the invisible.

RR: It's incredible to see how much space we give to questions of language as we try to define what CRIP Lab does and what is its context and modus operandi. Coming from the perspective of the "architect" that has been closely operating with institutions of art and education, I can say that even though semiotics and "discourse" are critical in our field and education, "disability discourse" is very much nonexistent. Environmental designers, who come into much contact with art and the visual realm, and who communicate and create visual documents and materials, have little to zero exposure to issues of disability as it plays out in their considerations of space. In many instances during the design or architecture student's grooming, there is an idea that they are an "artist", that they sculpt and mould the environment, and then they dissect it using language. Therefore, there is a priority to make spaces and buildings that have a compelling "form" or "formal/spatial architectural argument". Even though many design and architecture programs give much attention to practical issues such as structural integrity and building system design, accessibility is somehow seen as a boring and sad niche that distracts from the many opportunities an architect can have to make a statement *as an artist*. In fact, many of my students and colleagues have stated that doing a Master's degree in architecture felt like they were doing an MFA, since they relied so heavily on the graphic and the visuals to convey their message, aside from the clear spatial, "sculptural", gestures they designed and talked about through convoluted and lengthy, inaccessible architectural-philosophical jargon.

With this experience, I joined the Disability Caucus, where I met Pam and where these ideas of creating a meaningful "disability discourse" emerged. I was looking for a platform where this

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discourse for a cross-disciplinary platform could thrive; where architects could talk to designers who could talk to artists who could talk to administrators, other educators, etc. etc. When that didn't amount to much through the Disability Caucus, due to bureaucratic cumbersomeness mixed with low interest, Pam, Matt, and I diverged and created what I have called several times our little "start-up". Using this model, where we were a group of academics and practitioners rallying connections and interested parties old and new, we were able to slowly grow our network and create a critical mass of participants that eventually captured the attention of the institution in its formal form. A grassroots, inverse kind of process. Personally, I hope that our initiative will not lose its "start-up"-y nature since our detachment from certain academic codes allowed us to move with agility, flexibility, and malleability. This, in turn, allows us to create, in a way, a particular form of collaboration that alludes more to a collegiate group project than to a formal boardroom assembly. This "informal" structure aligns well with certain projects that I feel would benefit the trajectory of an architecture or design student's education. If accessibility in architecture, at least here in Canada, is strictly adhered to within the guidelines of building codes and not a step beyond, I wonder whether an "informal" act of design can be taught and executed ad-hoc somewhere here in Toronto, as a response to real needs of people with disabilities out in the street. There's a term coined by the Rick Hansen Foundation, whom I work with closely here in Canada, called "meaningful access", which speaks about realistic and comprehensive, cross-disability and cross-sensory accessibility. In other words, if an accessible washroom, that is up to code, is located at the top of a set of stairs, that is also up to code, that's not meaningful access. Here, many environments that are supposedly "accessible" by code, are "meaningfully" inaccessible. This paradox demands attention and opens an opportunity for creative "retrofit" solutions that work outside of the code and its limited systematic and myopic mechanisms.

CRIP Lab can be that mechanism, through which we can implement these kinds of ideas into our school's curriculum. For example, I have been speaking of creating a mixed (art, design, architecture) studio course, where students will go out into the built environment, and together we would design and make solutions for meaningful access. This could mean ramps, benches, awnings, shelters, pavilions, lighting fixtures, signage, tactile attention indicators, public art, and a mixture of all of these together. The work of LA-based firm LOHA, specifically their "Big Blue Bus Stop" project, for example, comes to mind here, as a precedent for a modular intervention in the built environment that engages in public art and accessibility through physical, visual, audio as well as tactile mediums. This resulted in creating an attractive environment that activated a public space that would have otherwise been very utilitarian. With design and architecture students' increased dependence on the digital as the locus of their design process, here emerges an opportunity to use design-school resources such as workshops and manufacturing spaces to practice a design-build approach to solving real challenges in our built environment. John Stilgoe (1998), who taught the art of exploration for many years at Harvard University, elaborated in his "Outside Lies Magic" on the benefits of taking a non-technological, multisensory, and experiential approach. Stilgoe's adage, that "Exploration is a liberal art, because it is an art that liberates, that frees, that opens away from narrowness. And it is fun" (p. 12), can be used as motivation to navigate, glean information and impressions from the local landscapes, histories, and buildings. Not only will this support Berger's challenge of the "expert" model of art appreciation and understanding, but it will also facilitate collaborative solution-finding for better, more meaningful access in our shared, public spaces.

PP: Roman, I think centring research and action with disability as the platform is so compelling. It promulgates the possibility of interdisciplinarity and difference in so many areas. This is certainly a departure from the modernist art and design education paradigm still prevalent in subject-based art and design curriculum and often seen in expert over-specialization. I asked a Chair at my university the other day why a certain faculty member was only teaching three sections of the same course every year, while I was often assigned new and very complex courses. The reply was, "Well, this is all he is able to teach." He was so specialized that this was his area and only area. But the siloing of art and design education into select areas is breaking down. Teaching art is a much more complex and critical practice.

The conversation among educators often (de)evolves here to questioning how will our students acquire the necessary skills to draw, paint, sculpt, print, make video, and digital imagery? Perhaps, I wonder, is it not time to risk the loss, for a time, of these distinct subject areas? As we, as educators, have found, attention to different cultures affects how and what we make. And those of us who live within a diverse community of disability creatives are no different. What are the new tools, languages, and images that we are developing as disability artists? How are we revisioning space and place as designers and architects?

"Personally, I hope that our initiative will not lose its "start-up"-y nature since our detachment from certain academic codes allowed us to move with agility, flexibility, and malleability"

David Heisinger-Nixon (2017) in *On Crip Horizons* writes:

> One of the most valuable questions that Disability Studies often calls us to ask, echoing Judith Butler's sentiments on Gilles Deleuze's important essay, is simply "What can a body do?" (Examined Life, 2008; Deleuze, 1992)... A better question might be "what can a body do to _____?" Critical Disability Studies frameworks allow us to fill in new, more flexible, more holistic, and more dissenting questions: what can a (disabled) body do to domesticity? What can it do to industry? To neoliberal capitalism? To national trajectories? When brought to bear on these political and cultural structures, we are provided a lens which destabilizes and denaturalizes, challenging the roles these factors play in producing a more equitable world. (np)

Sean Lee (2019) disability curator and arts programmer at Tangled Arts + Disability notes that these Crip horizons act as a new aesthetic and a promise for future imaginings. "Disability is not something we have but something we participate in" (np).

How will this then have an impact on how we proceed with the Lab, influence Lab presentations and even our teaching?

MH: Roman, I'm reminded of my dear friend , the artist Juliet Robson who made a work for a project and publication I curated in 2001 responding to the context of Degenerate Art (2001), where she went shopping without her wheelchair, pulling herself through the shopping centre (mall in your language) without the normal use of her legs. I remember being in a pub with her where she was complaining that all these artists were creating exciting immersive performance works and her experience of these were reduced to "the safe space", when the thing that we actually value is not safety, where was her right to be unsafe. It was accessible but only in the legislative sense. It's a problem I think in Environmental Design when addressing questions of diversity, and considering what is actually disabling. How do we enable genuine access and participation? Perhaps we also have to accept that exclusion is an inevitable consequence of any practice. Particularly when we consider all the forms in which exclusion is manifested, whether by design or accident. I think in the context of performances where there are always people who "don't get it", do we have an automatic ethical obligation to them too?

RR: Matt, your story of Juliet Robson is so poignant because it illuminates the somewhat unclear boundaries of who we think of when we think of inclusion and who we ignore or take for granted, when we try, as Jutta Treviranus of the IDRC said, to be "diverse". One of the things a lot of disability activists, including Emily Ladau and Judith Heumann, have been talking about - is progress over perfection. Similarly to the delicate subject of free speech and the extent of democracy's reach into our private lives, inclusion is something that attempts to be universal and equitable at the same time. In other words, we have not just an ethical, but in a way a legal obligation as well (if we were to try to actually enforce the Canadian Human Rights Code, for example) to include the people who "don't get it". Some people, for example, think that individuals with disabilities should be thankful in instances where upon approaching a building, an accessible entrance is offered. In a worse, but more probable scenario, there would have been none and people in wheelchairs, for example, would have been denied entrance to begin with. Do these voices belong then, to those who "don't get it?" or do they represent a segment of society that negates perfection in favour of progress? A key factor here is education, and showing people, whether through performances (art), commercials on tv (pro-disability rights campaigns) or other means, what it's like for a person with a disability to live and navigate spaces that abled-bodied people take for granted. It's about empathy and opening up to a different (maybe for now) human experience, which means taking an active step to acknowledge diversity and a shared humanity.

During my time working in Tel Aviv, Israel, I developed a relationship with Access Israel, which is the leading accessibility rights and awareness foundation there. One of the things I was impressed by the most was their educational programming for pupils starting in elementary school all the way to undergraduates in universities. Through their approach, "feeling accessibility" was a way to increase empathy and share differences. This was done by meeting people with disabilities at a young age, trying to navigate a space in a wheelchair, learn how to communicate in sign language, or work together blindfolded or with ear-muffs. We are well aware that these kinds of approaches are highly controversial as they risk simplifying the complexity of one's lived experience with a disability.

"It's about empathy and opening up to a different (maybe for now) human experience, which means taking an active step to acknowledge diversity and a shared humanity"

As such, it's important to note that these do not aim to replace the lived experience, but to offer schoolchildren a glimpse into a broader human condition. We are all temporarily abled, and being a "carer" is perhaps disabling in a way, but then we get into Jay Irizawa's thinking, asking ourselves - who is the disabled person here? Aren't we all disabled to begin with in one way or another?

PP: If we begin with this premise, Roman, then we need to accommodate a huge range of knowing and being in our work, with our partners, and in our classrooms. I see this realized through a joyful storying of human experience.

MH: Early in our meetings, Jutta made the proposition that "diversity is the great opportunity, inclusion is the great challenge", I think this is the core purpose of our joyful storying.

PP: The challenge though often becomes, in our collaborative work and with our participants and students, is how we might reach a workable position for action. For us this is an ongoing commitment to working through our differences and acknowledging that the strength of these differences can push us into new and perhaps inconceivable directions that we often cannot predict at the present time.

I think this conversation serves to model the possibilities for ongoing and future conversations among many of us in the larger art and design education field and beyond.

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