

Props to Bad Artists: On Research-Creation and a Cultural Politics of University-Based Art

Glen Lowry

Volume 40, Number 1, 2015

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1032751ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032751ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Lowry, G. (2015). Props to Bad Artists: On Research-Creation and a Cultural Politics of University-Based Art. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 40(1), 42–46. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1032751ar>

debated fear that Horowitz highlights in her introduction) because the disciplining of disciplinary frames, methods, and questions is a process always in flux; always “undisciplining” at the same time as it disciplines. Rather than reaffirm the need for “artists to define our own terms of reference,”⁵ this *Polemics* focuses instead on a proliferation of artistic methodologies and outputs. Viewed through the lenses offered below, I would like to propose research-creation as an important contemporary queering of the academy: hearkening back to Judith Butler’s invocation of Michel Foucault in *Gender Trouble*,⁶ we might look to artistic “acts” rather than to artistic “identity.”

Together, the following contributions speak to current debates in research-creation methodology and assessment in the Canadian university. They are motivated by the belief that it is important to accommodate various kinds of research-creation. Indeed, to train in research-creation at Concordia University is a far cry from doing so at the University of Alberta. These are conversations that—as with the impact of feminist and critical race studies on the academy—can only happen once a certain degree of recognition has been established, recognition granted

by UAAC and *RACAR*, that I consider crucial at this key moment in the critical discourse of research-creation in Canada.

Notes

- 1 Risa Horowitz, ed., “Practices / Pratiques,” *RACAR* 39.1 (Spring 2014): 25–39.
- 2 I hasten to add that I do think that this is an important issue. My point is that limiting research-creation to the project of securing research funding for studio artists working in universities, while itself an important political and practical issue, limits the scope of what the critical discourse of research-creation can and should become. We need a “both/and” conversation here.
- 3 Natalie Loveless, “Practice in the Flesh of Theory,” *The Canadian Journal of Communication Studies* 37, 1 (2012): 93–108.
- 4 Risa Horowitz, “Introduction: As if from nowhere... artists’ thoughts about research-creation,” *RACAR* 39.1 (Spring 2014), 25.
- 5 Horowitz, “Introduction,” 25.
- 6 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York, 1990).

Props to Bad Artists: On Research-Creation and a Cultural Politics of University-Based Art

GLEN LOWRY, EMILY CARR UNIVERSITY OF ART + DESIGN

Good Research? Bad Art?

This value-laden binary elicits groans. Yet it takes us to the heart of a trenchant critique of new forms of academic, research-based art and institutional culture change. The duality also highlights ethical questions about the efficacy of creative-practice research and the pitfalls of university-supported creative projects. SSHRC established its research-creation program to target creative practitioners, yet word on the street is that it is rigged against *real* artists who make *good art*. Among professionals, there is a sense that despite the generous budgets and timelines, academic support comes with strings attached. Or so I hear in the “art school,” the specialized art and design university.

Old enough to remember Michael Jackson’s re-appropriation of *bad*, his ability to popularize its idiomatic use to mean *good*, I am skeptical of judgments hidden beneath the guise of aesthetic discernment: *good* (work *we* appreciate because it affirms

ideals we are educated into) vs. *bad* (work that fails to respect established mores, particularly those underwritten by academic study). I am also old enough to have read the *sick* work of Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, among other feminist, queer, and racialized academics, and appreciate their interrogation of the Manichean values valorizing literature over potboilers, classical concertos over Hip Hop, and art over television. I offer this provocation as a spirited word-up to artists who trouble disciplinary differences to reach across a creative practice (art) and scholarly investigation (research) divide. I am inspired by colleagues at Emily Carr University and beyond who recognize the need to cross this divide, and I seek to reframe discussion of creative practice research in relation to ethical concerns about the function of contemporary culture: academic and creative practice.

Before discussing research-creation, I need to acknowledge the tenuous position of creative-practice research within Canadian universities. Not only are the specialized art and design

universities newcomers to degree granting, they are also the smallest players in the arena of external research funding, a space dominated by elite universities. Given the emergent nature of Canada's art and design universities and the heated competition for government support, discussions of transforming creative practice to fit research agendas can be impassioned. Without wading into a definitional quagmire, I will say there is considerable debate about the epistemological and methodological status of creative practice in relation to other forms of academic research. How the work of visual artists, writers, musicians, dancers, other performing artists, designers, and architects is evaluated alongside other types of academic endeavour provides an important point of focus for those overseeing the use and distribution of research funding: national and provincial funding agents, university administrators, research ethics boards, and the faculty eligible for support.

Defining creative practice as research is controversial. Coming to terms with "Research Involving Creative Practices," the SSHRC Ethics Special Working Committee wrote a chapter on creative practice for the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (TCPS 2).¹ To date, however, this document has not been taken up: TCPS 2 provides only a cursory definition of creative-practice research. This is confusing and begs questions of ethical standards and institutional roles and responsibilities regarding creative-practice research. TCPS 2 and Research Ethics Boards (REB) compliance has been a requirement for smaller institutions coming on stream with Tri-Council funding. Unsurprisingly this has produced pushback from creative practitioners who would rather not submit REB applications and prefer instead to function within the conventions of professional practice. Without clarity at Tri-Council, creative-practice researchers continue to work at the margins of the social sciences and humanities, further confusing the relationship between art and design universities and comprehensive universities.

The ethical imperative of creative practice research generally and research-creation specifically remains important, whether artist-researchers function under the gaze of REBs or not. Unlike *bad* art, which hinges on aesthetic concerns, *bad* research in the humanities and sciences tends to be easier to assess on methodological grounds. First, *bad* research cannot be reproduced or verified, and its findings fail to account for statistical im/probability. Improbable or unwanted results can produce scientific breakthroughs, which lead *good* researchers to generally seek to explain or replicate unexpected findings. Second, *bad* research obfuscates or falsifies claims about data: refusing to maintain transparency vis-à-vis methods, analysis, and conclusions, it withholds and alters results. Third, *bad* research priori-

tizes the motives of researchers or funders over those of society: drug trials that avoid double-blind review in fear of displeasing industry partners, despite obvious risks, for instance, or politically-motivated studies that seek devious ways to generate and interpret data that discredit global warming.

Bad research is categorically different from *bad* art. The conditions producing *bad* research can and have been instrumental in the production of great works of art. A masterpiece by definition cannot be reproduced, or if it can, say in the form of a photograph or a repurposed urinal, there are tight controls on where this is permitted. Great art is grounded in the imagination of the artist capable of re-describing facts in magical ways. Great art can make patrons happy, even when it pushes norms of acceptability. These examples may overstate the case, but I point to the good research / bad art dichotomy because it foregrounds a relational imperative that needs to be considered as we think about new practices of and institutional spaces for creative practitioners *qua* university researchers. This change impacts how art and design are taught and learned. In response to funding opportunities and a proliferation of studio-based graduate degrees, we see growing discussions about practice-led research in art and design, arts-based research, artistic inquiry,² and critical-creative collaboration.³ It is incumbent upon us—theorists and practitioners, as well as theorist practitioners and practicing theorists—to carefully consider how we situate our work.

Not wanting to proffer too strident a definition of *good* research or *good* research-creation, I will say that it might be qualitatively different from *good* art and may, in fact, circulate outside professional art circuits of peer-reviewed, curated exhibitions. *Good* research-creation pulls professional academics—artist-researchers along with others humanists and social scientists—outside zones of comfort and away from monitored disciplinary divisions or divisions of labour. It challenges us to think about what constitutes knowledge, how new ideas, ways of knowing, and forms of innovation draw on deep-seated cultural traditions.

Knowledge—Production, Translation, Mobilization

Art and design knowledge is rooted in experimentation and research. Creative practice draws on highly developed forms of knowledge production, translation, and mobilization. This knowledge might be described in terms of technique or the mastery of materials (artifacts and spaces), conceptual rigour, or complex concatenations of social and interpersonal engagement. Like their university colleagues, professional artists and designers are highly disciplined. Grounded in a traditional

scholasticism, the training of visual artists, for example, tends to involve negotiations with long-standing academic divisions. As with other forms of academic endeavour, the objects of art or design require epistemological apprehension, in part because they have been crucial to the socio-political developments of Western culture since (at least) the Enlightenment. Maintaining an a priori link between art and science, this line of thinking asserts the centrality of art in the expansion of Western systems of knowledge. The relationship between culture and science remains crucial to our understanding of the role of government and education in contemporary culture and social development. Nevertheless, when we talk about research-creation, research tends to trump creation. Positioned as late-comers to the game, artists are *nouveaux arrivants* who must learn a new language to explain studio practices in ways that fit SSHRC requirements.

Applying to SSHRC, creative practitioners are encouraged to frame interests in terms borrowed from humanities and social scientific methodologies. Recognizing the need to balance a “connection to contemporary literary/artistic practices” with a “scholarly apparatus” (SSHRC guidelines), creative practitioners are asked about “research question,” “methodology,” and discourse. SSHRC’s research-creation committee guidelines are clear:

The research-creation proposal *must address clear research questions, offer theoretical contextualization within the relevant field(s) of artistic inquiry, present a well-considered methodological approach and creative process, and produce an artwork.* Both the research and the resulting literary/artistic works must meet peer standards of excellence and be suitable for publication, public performance or viewing.⁴

The expectation that funded research will produce an artwork is significant, yet it also requires successful applicants to marshal administrative skills to manage added workload.⁵

Linking *research* and *creation* hinges on coming to terms with “peer standards.” Who is qualified to assess research-creation projects? Colleagues inside the university system or professional artists, curators, and critics outside it? This divide between experts in academic research and those knowledgeable about contemporary art and design practices might lead to increased specialization in art and design research. It suggests a need for new practitioners who are comfortable with the language of research and conversant with art and design professions.

There is a gap between the expressed intentions of supporting contemporary art practice and the funding available to artists. While there are artists who have been very successful at

winning grants from SSHRC, the jury tends to support teams of researchers with clearly expressed interests in new digital technologies,⁶ as opposed to those from conventional disciplines such as painting, sculpture, or creative short fiction. Emphasis on student training (HQPs) and publication, together with increased administrative demands, may interfere with successful applicants’ ability to produce professional-quality work. Arguably SSHRC, unlike Canada Council, is outside the business of contemporary art and upholding professional standards. Student training, public accountability, technological innovation, knowledge translation, and new economic development are all laudable goals; my point is that these are not always consistent with those of professional artists and designers.

If research-creation does produce *bad art*, why? Perhaps, despite rhetoric to the contrary, SSHRC’s research-creation program is not geared to allow professional artists and designers to bring their best work forward. Coming to terms with this heretical statement might, I hope, allow us to shift discussions of SSHRC funding toward more openness in relation to intention and expectation. We need better awareness of the vital knowledge practices that underwrite creative practices—the deep cultural knowledge represented by the production of artworks, films, music, design, and architecture. Visual methods, participatory action, social engagement—these are bread-and-butter concerns for contemporary artists and designers. The skills creative practitioners bring to bear on them deserve as much attention as those reified in conventional academic methodologies and discourse. It is crucial to affirm the epistemological (not to mention sociological, methodological, ontological, and political) place of artistic practice alongside other forms of academic research. Creative practice is a valuable means of exploring and sharing new and not-so-new knowledge about the world. Remembering this, theorists and practitioners might maintain a social imperative for cultural production that allows us to focus discussions of research-creation around certain foundational concerns. This in turn might be integral to rebooting government involvement in the production, understanding, and sharing of twenty-first century knowledge.

An Institutional Reboot: Toward another Massey-Levesque Commission

Research-creation teeters on the edge of institutional absorption. Viewed in terms of a loosely orchestrated movement of university-affiliated artists, researchers, theorists, graduate students, and administrators, all of whom are working to realize, anticipate, and refine government funding opportunities, research-creation provides a strong vantage point from which

to consider twenty-first century creative practices and practitioners: new disciplinary subjects and objects. As the other contributions in this Polemics suggest, the concept of research-creation adopted and mobilized by SSHRC owes a debt to contemporary art (including but not limited to relational practices, community-based art, institutional critique, and new media collaborations). But how do we see this debt being taken up? How do researchers respond to the exigencies of new funding opportunities or new forms of accounting? How does this work fit with contemporary art practice? Given the broad spectrum of social practices from which they draw, what strategies do research-creation projects bring to questions of cultural difference, healing, or social justice?

SSHRC and Canada Council for the Arts have partnered in the selection of the research-creation committee. This is vital in understanding the role of professional artists in assessing “artistic merit” together with a “scholarly apparatus” (research questions, field of inquiry, methodology, dissemination plan). But is this partnership enough to ensure that funding remains relevant to contemporary art practice? In light of SSHRC’s generous budgets and timelines, is this partnership sufficient to resist the drive to instrumentalize culture production, to make creative practices known and knowable?

Thinking about the cultural politics of this transformation, we might look to the Massey-Levesque Commission and the creation of the Canada Council for the Arts, Library and Archives Canada, Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), National Film Board (NFB), and investments in post-secondary research.⁷ For the past six decades, Canadian arts and culture along with post-secondary education and research have been integral to social development. Resisting a desire to invite Richard Florida to a town hall or to put faith in the saving graces of a hipster class, we might remember that artists, designers, media makers, musicians, curators, architects, writers, and other intellectuals have long invested in research and knowledge mobilization to further social development and to critique its impact on stakeholders.

Locating social justice at the heart of this discussion, rather than addressing it as an addendum to mainstream debates, we might ask how new forms of creative practice and innovation will help citizens and governments respond to important cultural challenges. In particular, I want to encourage readers to consider the way artists have engaged with the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). Recognizing that Canada’s TRC is a first among the developed nations and that we have the infrastructure and juridical will to address its findings, Canadians are challenged to think about the relationship between knowledge (research) and innovative expres-

sion (creation). The truth and truth telling that are integral to the TRC take us back to constitutional treaties and difficult questions about our colonial past. The significance and scale of the TRC invite us to ask how artists, researchers, and educators might mobilize knowledge, skills, and resources. The cultural programming around TRC events has been promising; we can all look forward to seeing how galleries, municipalities, social systems, and the many other institutional bodies that mounted exhibitions and programs fulfill pledges to keep the work going after the completion of the TRC. There are few moments in Canada’s cultural and political histories that are as imbricated with transformational potential.

Bookended by the 1951 Massey-Levesque Commission Report and the TRC Final Report (2015), we stand poised for a dramatic change in how we Canadians understand ourselves, the knowledge we create, and how it is mobilized to further social good. Thinking about reworking a sixty-year-old separation of Canada Council and SSHRC mandates, we might look at the ways in which Aboriginal knowledge and culture were relegated to craft and dismissed from the concerns of nation formation, and at the orchestrated developments of professional art and post-secondary education. As we consider how jurors from SSHRC and Canada Council sit together around a research-creation table, we need to ask who gets to decide what constitutes *good* research and *good* art, but also what or who is left out.

I say let’s keep talking about who or what makes *bad* art and *bad* research.

Notes

- 1 Mary Blackstone et al., “Research Involving Creative Practices: A Chapter for Inclusion in the TCPS,” *The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Ethics Special Working Committee (SSHWC): A Working Committee of The Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics (PRE)*, (2008), <http://www.pre.ethics.gc.ca/eng/archives/policy-politique/reports-rapports/ricp-ripc/>.
- 2 See Henk Borgdorff, “The Debate on Research in the Arts,” *Kunsthøgskolen i Bergen*, (2006), http://www.ips.gu.se/digitalAssets/1322/1322713_the_debate_on_research_in_the_arts.pdf; Henk Borgdorff, “The Production of Knowledge in Artistic Research,” 2011, <http://www.artun.ee/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Borgdorff-2011.pdf>; Henk Borgdorff et al., “The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia” (Amsterdam, 2012), <https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/handle/1887/18704>; and Rachel Nash and W. F. Garrett-Petts, “Artists’ Statements & the Nature of Artistic Inquiry,” *Open Letter* 4 (Fall 2007).

- 3 Glen Lowry, M. Simon Levin, and Henry Tsang, "Maraya as Visual Research: Mapping Urban Displacement and Narrating Artistic Inquiry," *Cultural Mapping as Cultural Inquiry*, ed. Will Garrett-Petts, Nancy Duxbury, and David MacLennan (New York, 2015).
- 4 Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, "Guidelines for Applying to Research-Creation" (2014), http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/fine_arts-arts_lettres-eng.aspx. Emphasis added.
- 5 Glen Lowry and Ashok Mathur, "A Qualitative Study of Research Creation," 2008, unpublished.
- 6 Michelle Picard-Aitken and Frédéric Bertrand, "Review and Conceptualization of Impacts of Research/Creation in the Fine Arts: Final Report," *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada*, 29 September 2008, http://www.sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/about-au_sujet/publications/RC_fine_artsFinalE.pdf.
- 7 Massey Commission, *Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, 1949–1951* ("The Massey Report"), (Ottawa, 1951).

Mentoring Research-Creation: Secrets, Strategies, and Beautiful Failures

CAITLIN FISHER, YORK UNIVERSITY

Many things about how research-creation is understood in the university context provoke, challenge, and engage me. But here I will focus my thoughts on graduate education in the context of research-creation: its demands and pitfalls, as well as the terrifying unmapped spaces and potential it opens up, and the epistemological challenges it clearly poses to the work of the university.

I'll cut to the chase: if we really want innovation in the academy, tenured faculty need to say yes more bravely and more fully to supervising students' research-creation work. We also need to champion the value of research-creation faculty in examinations and hiring committees. Finally, by using our resources—including infrastructure, seniority, personal and professional networks—we must work to create spaces where students can risk failure.

Because... shh... surely I am not alone in feeling that a lot of this work fails in lots of ways. I will even say it: some of it is actually terrible. But even the failures often challenge me in compelling ways.

A Story about Failure

This seems like the appropriate moment to tell you that my own work as a graduate student was a pretty spectacular failure. But it was also successful in ways that I think need to be valued.

In 2000, I completed a native hypermedia work, probably the first Canadian-born digital dissertation with no print companion. This was happening just as my university was circulat-

ing a discussion paper claiming that the future of writing was PDF and proposing that all electronic dissertations be submitted using 12 point Times New Roman font and one-and-a-half inch margins. Then, as now, I saw the future of writing differently. I was particularly interested in the epistemological status of interface, especially the capacity of interfaces to make connections and arguments intelligible to readers.¹

My dissertation, *Building Feminist Theory: Hypertextual Heuristics*—burned onto CD-Roms that have recently erased themselves and were tellingly never filed with UMI by my institution—was an exploration, in hypertext, of the resonances and productive couplings between digital writing technologies and feminist theories. Institutional discussions around research-creation were then still in their infancy. So in order to justify this type of project, somewhere in the introduction I included that great Isadora Duncan quotation, "If I could write it, I *wouldn't have to dance it*." Implicit in my title was the claim that the process of shaping hypertext was itself a form of feminist theory production. Rather than simply identifying feminist hypertexts and explaining them in terms of a feminist hermeneutic, the dissertation used theory to build a new kind of text, a text that sought a form resonant with the disciplinary-crossing knowledges it explored. Understanding the interface and the text to be co-constitutive of meaning, then, I struggled at all stages with the choice of interface and with the limitations of code available to me at the time of writing. The machine worked on my thoughts in a way Nietzsche had always told me it would if I could only let it... and I learned.