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## Editors

Eeva Anttila  
University of the Arts Helsinki

Terry Barrett  
University of North Texas

William J. Doan  
Pennsylvania State University

S. Alex Ruthmann  
New York University

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## How can ABER Serve the Public Good? A Critical Brechtian Perspective

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones  
Arizona State University, USA

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### The Premise

I must start with my premise about Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER). Conventionally I find that some of ABER uses art as a prompt for participants to think, reflect and reveal, after which the researcher gathers the “data” garnered from the participants through these prompts and experiences by interviewing the participants and, subsequently analyzes that data in sometimes, often, standard ways. Or, someone is making art and is solipsistic, exclusively focused on her/his experiences, rendering those experiences in aesthetic forms. I consider the former to not be ABER and I consider the latter to be an inadequate performance of ABER. In this essay I will be dealing with this latter manifestation and try to demonstrate how we can take this form of ABER and transform it into something that extends beyond the personal, beyond  $n = I$ , even when the ABER practitioner is in fact dealing with her/himself as the  $n$ .

My premise: ABER involves someone making art as her/his response to educational phenomena. I make art and through the process of making art I perform my research. I may have “data” that I have gathered in more standard ways (or not) but I work with it not through

standard means of analysis and thinking but through making art that is a response to the “data.” My essay and concern are based on this premise. My concern is with the importance of making good art as the only route to doing good ABER.

I begin with a riff and then onto a Brechtian analysis of doing ABER.

### **The Riff**

In art there is the artist. While there are certainly collaborative artists and co-produced art, for the most part I would say art is the artist confronting her/his world with an inquiring body and wanting to know of the conundrum of experience and “What makes something tick” through the individual encounter with the world. The artist works in the medium of the image whether rendered on the medium of “crayon, ink, paint, and more on paper, canvas, film, a barn wall support” or “sound & silence” or “motion in space” or the “plastic art of sculptural enactment”. No matter the medium it is what Buber termed,

. . . a man faced by a form which desires to be made through him (sic) into a work. This form is no offspring of his [sic] soul, but is an appearance which steps up to it and demands of it the effective power. (Buber, 1958, p. 9)

This makes of the artist a person responsible *to* that demand. “No offspring of his soul”: no idiosyncratic noumenal being, but the flesh of the world demanding its due.

So much of art is the singular artist but, as we can see with Buber and later with Brecht, this singularity is not what the artist feels, which is nothing in the face of this demand, but what the world asks.

So, we have the artist, we have the world, we have a demand.

The artist is the vessel of some sort of encounter, the distillatory of experience, the rendering of new relationship demanded. The particular artist is the particular focus of the art: “this artist, this art” and “that artist, that art”.

But given Buber’s assertion that the art is “no offspring of his soul”, we cannot allow the art to become solipsistic, to allow this n of 1 to be turned inward, except as: “a geography of the world out there”, experienced “in here” as a momentary turning away in order to *feel* that territory in ways as yet unfelt.

The art must return to the world for its warrant, must turn to the world for its moment of insight. Without that connection the artist is but rummaging about in the attic of her or his

memoried life, an attic hidden away as was Mr. Rochester's mad wife.

Not only must the artist return to the world but the artist must find the world in her, in him, find the ground which s/he did not create but upon which her or his own soul is founded. There is no art that comes out of the soul, which is not simultaneously found outside the soul in the world that was there before this soul existed. This is the truth of which I wish to speak, the social solidification of me, the intersection of self, soul, and world, no revelation this but only the beginning of wisdom.

For it is wisdom that I think we need, not wisdom of where our work leads for it does not lead. Leading happens from those who encounter the work just as someone leads a horse out into the green pasture and rides into the wind or sideways to the wind that blows in from the world outside the pasture, the stream, the forest, the mountains. Can you feel that wind you did not make, feel that horse that canters in its own way and bears you into the world again?

I ask you not to think about that special self that is you, or that you think is you, but about this self born into this world by all the others and bear witness to your non-isolation.

I was once asked about the personal character of my work: wasn't I the center of that writing? I was shocked and responded: it wasn't about me, it was *never* about me. I was but some "data", a story I knew well but nonetheless nothing to do with me except as a sample of the world. I asked her to read again and see me as but one expression of that social world into which my story is borne.

The *n of 1* is always an *n of multiplicity* – the 1 is a fiction.

It is a useful fiction for it is simultaneously the case that it is "I" who is the sieve, the funnel, the flask in which boils that particular moment in the world that is queried, is addressed, addresses me. It is my specificity that is the beginning moment, the moment of the world, that particular collision or sliding inside of "me and it" all at once.

Such a peculiar inter-moment – they are all peculiar and specific and, yet, they are all pedestrian, ordinary, common, common as dirt wherever you find them, as the dandelion which is treated as a weed, not treated as its own unique self,. What *might* I know about the world through the specific expression of "this dandelion?"

To know this is not enough and to think of the world again is to think of the public good even as we are in the world at all. Even if our attention upon the public good is oblique, the very notion of the public good is the starting gun. This is, perhaps, sufficient in order to credit us

with that intention of the public good. Perhaps not enough yet, but the intention may be a thread, a thin ghost drawn through the skein of the work that if we but have it hovering at the edge of consciousness is enough, may be all we need and all we should have, lest the work be driven from the incautious conscious mind that *is not* the origin of art.

Remember Buber: the world calls *us* to *it*, demands of *us*, not we the masters but we the *servants* to its need. If we become the masters, we become a sledgehammer that destroys the now brittle anvil upon which the art is forged. And in so doing the world disappears and we are lost in the void that becomes ourselves, suffocating in the settling dust of what we have brought to ruin.

### **Brecht**

In this part of my discussion I will focus on an exegesis of Brecht, using two sources: Brecht's essays on art, critiquing Lukás, found in *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977) and Brecht's essay on "Theatre for Pleasure and Theatre for Instruction" (1936).

#### ***The Purpose of Instructional Theatre***

In his essay "Theatre for Instruction and Theatre for Pleasure", Brecht notes that the artist may be motivated by a moral impulse. In his case, the moral impulse that animates him or her (and which can often be merely an intellectual concern with what is right) "is not only [a] moral consideration that make[s] hunger, cold, and oppression hard to bear. . . . The objects of our inquiries was not just to arouse moral objections to such circumstances . . . but to discover the means for their elimination. We were not in fact speaking in the name of morality but in that of the victims." This is similar to Toni Morrison's statement in her foreword to *The Bluest Eye* in which she writes about her use of a young girl as the center piece of the novel:

One problem was centering the weight of the novel's inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. Besides, it didn't work: many readers remain touched but not moved. (Morrison, Toni (2007-07-24). *The Bluest Eye* [Vintage International] . Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.)

She is telling us that her purpose was not to tell a moral tale in which we could nestle inside our emotional response but to move us to think about what we might do. The "what we might do" does not necessarily translate into conventional actions but Morrison is asking us, as is Brecht, to consider what we need to change in the world around us for this to change.

For Brecht his art, which he termed “epic theatre” was made to join with a “society which is interested in seeing vital questions freely aired with a view to their solution . . .” Brecht is suggesting that there is not a single answer or solution mandated by a particular political viewpoint but rather a “free airing” of ideas through the art which makes apparent the conditions under which we are living.

### ***Favor Instructional Theatre***

Brecht favors epic theatre but, more specifically, the Theatre of Instruction. In this theatre

The spectator was no longer in any way allowed to submit to an experience uncritically . . . by means of simple empathy with the characters in a play. The production took the subject-matter and the incidents shown and put them through a process of alienation: the alienation that is necessary to all understanding.

The epic theatre spectator has the following experience:

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it – That’s not the way – That’s extraordinary, hardly believable – It’s got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That’s great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.

Contrast this with the experience of the dramatic theatre spectator. This person says:

Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It’s only natural – It’ll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.”

This latter is what I think Toni Morrison references as being touched but not moved.

### ***Instructional Theatre Must be Art***

Such a theatre (or any art for that matter) may be seen as antithetical to art or pleasure and while Brecht is concerned with an art that can teach he does not separate this from an art that is pleasurable and an art that is adept at art. The idea of pleasure linked to instruction is not the more standard notion that learning, when it is genuine, is always pleasurable. Rather it is that art that is not good art cannot hope to be either pleasurable or instructive. As Brecht puts it, “Whatever knowledge is embodied in a piece of poetic writing has to be wholly transmuted

into poetry. Its utilization fulfills the very pleasure that the poetic element provokes”(4).

There is a problem with engagement with moral questions, an engagement which he does favor. It may be done at the expense of good art. In this case the engagement will fail. Brecht wants us to move beyond mere engagement with a moral question which he terms “observe without intervention”. He writes, that

[W]e [may start] our observations out of a pure passion for observing and without any practical motive, only to be completely staggered by their results.

One must begin in observation, in just seeing because if one begins with an already set idea of what the scene contains, then you will only see what you were already going to see, and nothing new for you will emerge. But having begun in observation, what eventuates must move both artist and recipient of art to consideration of previously unseen implications.

In my art, I do not start with what I know but with what I don't know. And I don't know a lot. Through the making of the art, through the inquiry into whatever it is that is the so-called “subject” of the art, I come to know something about my relationship, as a contextualized knower in the world, to that object of inquiry. I don't do this in a cognitively conscious manner. I allow the art to speak to me but, and I emphasize this, it is not a matter of being “led around by the nose” or “knowing” in any conscious sense. I make decisions on an aesthetically driven sense, a sensory, bodily, dreaming feel of the emerging “thing.” I allow it to speak to me and I allow multiple possibilities to be there and out of this I feel my way to what is emerging. In short, I have the art reveal newness to me. That is the idea, it seems to me of all research, that it surprises the researcher as much as those who receive the report. I think Brecht is telling us that were he to have a point to make through his art, then he could never be surprised because the art is being made to fulfill an already complete vision and the opportunity to be staggered is nullified.

Our difficulty, then, is how to make an art that explores, exposes, shows the world in a mirror in which we can find ourselves and our own place in the difficulties without proselytizing for a point of view which makes for failed art. As Brecht writes, too often

[t]he questions confronting our politically engaged literature have had the effect of making one particular problem very actual - the jump from one kind of style to another within the same work of art. . . . Political and philosophical considerations failed to shape the whole structure, the message was mechanically fitted into the plot. The ‘editorial’ was usually ‘inartistically’ conceived - so patently that the inartistic nature of the plot in which it was embedded, was overlooked.

The work fails when it is inartistic. The way to making art is to see the whole of the art, not merely the “content” that seems “correct” and not merely a love of form: conjoin the two - the form of the art is informed by political and philosophical considerations and political and philosophical considerations are only so “instructional” as their complexity finds a life in the chosen form. Stanley Aronowitz, in his essay “Colonized Leisure, Trivialized Work” (*False Promises*) wrote that John Ford, the filmmaker, might have made films that were politically to the right but his techniques were highly democratizing. For instance, he would place a single camera framing two people and let the scene unfold. An audience member was allowed to compose the scene in any way s/he saw fit. This is democratizing filmmaking as it is not manipulation to drive home a singular point of view. Aronowitz contrasted this to a film maker who made films that had politically acceptable content but his TV style editing technique produced a totalitarian experience as his many edits forced the viewer to interpret the film in specific ways. The aesthetics of this latter editing run counter to the desired politics expressed in the content of the film.

Another issue arises: how to maintain the complexity of human life processes even while witnessing the shift in social life. We are not about the making of “great individuals” in the form of characters or making even “individuals” in our work but rather the ways in which individuals struggle with the vagaries of the political-social-cultural-economic life in which they are engaged. The public good is served only when we witness this and link the personal to the social.

**Problem with the Theatre of Instruction: Not Amusing or Pleasurable and the Place of these in Making an Art Dedicated to the Public Good**

Brecht provides an image of a theatre that attempts to instruct through the art (there is ABER work of this ilk). Brecht is clearly disparaging of an art which, however well-meaning, ceases to be art, ceases to be, in his language in this essay, amusing.

Brecht sees this as a wrong tack:

Generally there is felt to be a very sharp distinction between learning and amusing oneself. The first may be useful [and educational research is often judged as to its usefulness in effecting change in education and if it doesn't then it's not useful], but only the second is pleasant. So we have to defend the epic theatre against the suspicion that it is a highly disagreeable, humourless, indeed strenuous affair. (p2)

Brecht asserts that “the contrast between learning and amusing oneself is not laid down by divine rule; it is not one that has always been and must continue to be.” (p.2) Brecht suggests

that what he terms amusement and pleasure are core to the art experience and that learning does not take place without them, especially in an instructional theatre (or instructional art of any kind). He writes, "If there were not such amusement to be had from learning, the theatre's whole structure would unfit it for teaching. Theatre remains theatre even when it is instructive theatre, and in so far as it is good theatre it will amuse." Insofar as it is good theatre: clearly only good theatre can both instruct and amuse, give pleasure.

But Brecht remains concerned that we will think that theatre is merely a teaching tool for he asks ". . . what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre." (p. 4) Brecht suggests (and this may be seem contradictory but I think it is not) that he needs scientific understanding in order to perform this sort of work. He does not feel capable that through his own imagination, he can imagine truths that need promulgation. For Brecht this is an artist's strategy that does not obviate "amusement" but allows Brecht to think *and* make art.

### **Place of Alienation in Art**

Returning to *alienation* we must note that Brecht argues for forestalling simple empathy as being of the greatest importance. (David Purpel, 2004, draws a distinction between compassion and sentimentality, notes that sentimentality does not lead to action but only to feeling badly for someone else.) An art that is meant to help people see in new ways that might bring to them some way to conceive of how the world might need changing, must start with them seeing that they are not seeing, must interrupt the sentimentality of art. (It is not the case, I believe, that art must be about changing the world in some major way but it is my belief that art functions to bring the world to us in ways that allow us to illuminate ourselves and place ourselves in the center of complicity with the world, whatever that means to us.)

This brings us directly to the issue of the relation of pleasure and amusement to a theatre that instructs. When Brecht contrasts the theatre of instruction with the theatre of pleasure it is not for the purpose of dismissing pleasure. Brecht writes of the history of theatre as becoming at his time a theatre of instruction.

Oil, inflation, war, social struggles, the family, religion, wheat, the meat market, all become subjects for theatrical representation. Choruses enlightened the spectator about facts unknown to him. Films showed a montage of events from all over the world. Projections added statistical material. . . . Right and wrong courses of action were shown. . . . The theatre became an affair for philosophers, but only for such philosophers as wished not just to explain the world but also to change it. So we had philosophy, and we had instruction. And where was amusement in all that? Were they sending us back to school, teaching us to read and write? Were we supposed to pass



exams, work for diplomas?

In sum, Brecht provides an image of a theatre (read any arts-based work) that attempts to instruct through the art. Brecht is clearly disparaging of an art which, however well-meaning, ceases to be art, ceases to be, in his language in this essay, amusing.

### **Genre and Form**

This plea leads on to a central concern of Brecht's, that we render reality in our art. This is the theatre Brecht sought: one that would awaken people through art dedicated to reality. To accomplish this it did not have to take some representational form, typical of "realism." Brecht felt that experimentalism was a perfectly acceptable approach to attempt realism. But, in the end, one must be in touch with reality. He, at the time, was working on a book on Caesar. He chose a diaristic approach and he felt the need to study extensively about Caesar to accomplish this. He asserts, in his aesthetic essays, that science can help the artist understand some things art will not reveal. The artist must be interested in many things in the world outside of art but in the end it is the art which reveals. So to be clear, I am not arguing for any particular mode of art-making or kind of product or even particular political viewpoint (all viewpoints should be welcome if the art is credible and the inquiry is humane). I am arguing for a focus on realism as Brecht describes it and on the making of art first as the only way to achieve understanding and that understanding is achieved through alienation, distancing, objectively slanted eyes toward one's own perspective. For, as Brecht notes, there are those Marxist artists who are not even aware that their art is actually complicitous with capital.

But Brecht remains concerned that we will think that theatre is merely a teaching tool for he asks ". . . what has knowledge got to do with art? We know that knowledge can be amusing, but not everything that is amusing belongs in the theatre." (p. 4) Brecht suggests (and this may be idiosyncratic) that he needs scientific understanding in order to perform this sort of work. He does not feel capable that through his own imagination, he can imagine truths that need promulgation.

### ***Rendering Reality and What Does it Take to Render Reality?***

This brings me to exactly what is done in making this art. A theatre dedicated to awakening us is dedicated to do so through a rendering of reality. To accomplish this it did not have to take some representational form, typical of "realism." As already noted Brecht had no problems with experimentalism. To render reality we must be aesthetically unafraid. We must not be concerned merely that the "message is correct." We must be concerned with rendering reality in ways that are effective not for message sending but for provoking thought. Realism requires our courage to attempt new approaches. As Brecht puts it:

With the people struggling and changing reality before our eyes, we must not cling to ‘tried’ rules of narrative, venerable literary models, eternal aesthetic laws. We must not derive realism as such from particular existing works, but we shall use every means, old and new, tried and untried, derived from art and derived from other sources, to render reality to men in a form they can master. (Brecht, 1977, p. 81)

To be realistic doesn’t necessarily mean to perform, in writing for an example,

“the so-called sensuous mode of writing - where one can smell, taste, and feel everything - is not automatically to be identified with a realistic mode of writing; we shall acknowledge that there are works which are sensuously written and which are not realistic, and realistic works which are not written in a sensuous style. . . . Realism is not a mere question of form. Were we to copy the style of these realists, we would no longer be realists. (p. 82)

Here we see Brecht making space for all kinds of art, not just conventional representational art. This, however, does not mean that the responsibility for an attention to reality is not required. And reality is a matter of  $n = many$  even when distilled through  $n = I$ .

### ***The Place of Form and Formalism in a Realistic, Instructional Art***

Brecht, in his essays attacking Lukács distinguishes between realism and reality. He favors reality, seeing realism as a particular genre of art that is no more privileged to represent reality than any other genre. But he also understands that the artist must be concerned with the form s/he is using to render that reality, must, as he puts it, be “constantly occupied with formal matters.” The problem with formalism is: it often falls into the trap of being exclusively interested in form and not what is contained in that form. In this case even a work done from a realist point of view can fall into formalism and be shown to be quite unreal.

Why is this? Because, in life the forms of life are filled with the content of life and it is not possible to separate the two. The form is filled with life and life can only be experienced from within some form. The artist must be careful to not fall into the trap of mere formalism even though careful choice of form and how to manipulate the form is essential to the making of art. Rather than being “formalistic” with a focus on form exclusively and not caring much about the meanings and content that is found within that form, we must attend to form that has a concomitant attention to what is contained and what is best contained by what form. To be clear: bad form and good content is bad art and good form and no content is bad art. Both are necessary: reality and form. The attention, in so much of ABER, to the self as a form, at all costs it seems, is problematic because it is not automatic that the world will be regained

thereby.

This is the point: that the world be regained in perhaps “new” ways that illuminate some corner, bring something to light that is not owned by the self even if reflected through the self. To have one’s attention on what is reflected and how it is connected to the larger world, to be clear about the possibility of this connection without necessarily explicitly explaining it (for explanations are dangerous narrowings of possibilities), this is what takes the solipsistic and makes it no longer solipsistic.

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### About the Author

Donald Blumenfeld-Jones is Associate Professor of Curriculum Studies and Ethics at Arizona State University. He received his doctorate in Curriculum Studies from UNC-Greensboro under David Purpel. He specializes in curriculum theory, ABER, ethics and the classroom, hermeneutics, and critical social theory. He has a book dedicated to all these areas (*Curriculum and the Aesthetic Life: Hermeneutics, Body, Democracy and Ethics in Curriculum Theory and Practice*). He has numerous refereed book chapters and journal articles. He received the James B. Macdonald Prize in Curriculum Theory and has given international keynote addresses in Brazil and Canada. He founded and directs ARTs (Arts-based Reflective Teaching), a teacher preparation program dedicated to the development of aesthetic and ethical consciousness as the basis for curriculum decision making and classroom teaching. He danced professionally for twenty years, performing, choreographing and teaching throughout the U.S. and Canada. He practices ABER using dance and poetry.

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## **“I Contain Multitudes”: The Challenges of Self-Representation in Arts-Based Educational Research**

Monica M. Prendergast  
University of Victoria, Canada

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### **Abstract**

We believe that the best arts based research aims to make a difference in the world.  
(Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 153).

Revelation of self can be argued as one of the central concerns of art. Self-study has informed art making to some degree for as long as we can know. Aesthetic philosophers, art critics and artists themselves have recognized self-portraiture, autobiography, memoir and confession as legitimate and often potent topics for artistic exploration. With this history of art practice in mind, what problem can there be for an arts-based educational researcher who wishes to engage in self-study? Of course, the artworld is not equal to the world of educational research, the latter of which is charged with the overarching social and ethical responsibilities to critically understand the problems within and work toward the improvement of teaching and learning. The rise of narrative inquiry, autobiography and arts-based educational research has opened up welcome spaces for the lives of teachers to be viewed as valuable and illuminating topics of investigation. That said, arts-based

educational researchers who do not make clear and consistent connections between their life stories and the potential improvement of the chronically impoverished (if not in some places wholly broken) public education system could be critically viewed as side-stepping or shirking their core social and ethical responsibilities

Do I contradict myself?  
Very well then I contradict myself,  
(I am large, I contain multitudes.)

from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman, Verse 51

[O]ne cannot reflect on self (radically or otherwise) without an accompanying reflection on the nature of the world in which one exists. And one's reflection on both one's self and one's world cannot be one's own alone: you and your version of your world must be public, recognizable enough to be negotiable in the "conversation of lives." (Bruner, 1993, p. 43)

This essay participates in the "conversation of lives" that makes up the small but active community of arts-based researchers in education. Donald Blumenfeld-Jones posed the overarching topic that was the catalyst for this set of related essays in the wake of his jurying of a number of dissertation studies for the Arts-Based Educational Research (ABER) Special Interest Group of the American Educational Research Association. I was co-chair of the dissertation award at this time, and Donald and I had some lengthy email dialogue around his growing concern that a number of the studies he was reading were self-studies that he saw as having little or no relation to the larger issues of education. The end result of that string of emails was Donald's idea to propose an ABER panel on the topic of how autobiographical or autoethnographical arts-based work serves, or fails to serve, the mandate of educational research to strive toward the improvement of teaching and learning.

My own research on poetic inquiry (Prendergast, 2007, 2009; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009) has shown me that self-study is undeniably a prominent, if not dominant, method in ABER praxis. To illustrate, almost 50% of the 182 peer-reviewed journal articles featuring poetry as part of their methodology I surveyed in 2006-2007 were coded as autobiographical or autoethnographical, at least in part (see Prendergast, 2009; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009). A 2012 survey update on the same topic shows a similar result (Clement & Prendergast, 2012). If this finding holds across other arts-based research approaches, then we can begin to 'see' ourselves as educational researchers who are deeply interested in and committed to arts-based forms of self-study. Yet the question arises: How does this interest in self-study serve, or fail to serve, the interests of the field of education and

the mandate of educational research to work toward the improvement of teaching and learning?

This essay consists of two sections followed by a brief conclusion. In Section One I consider the role of self-study—also called reflective practice, autobiography, autoethnography and life writing—in educational research in relation to how autobiography, memoir or self-portraiture plays a role in the artworld (Danto, 1964). I do this by placing a range of ABER practices on a continuum from more to less interested in self-study as a focus or component of a study. Section Two offers an autobiographical/autoethnographical poem I wrote as part of a previously published collaborative essay (Prendergast, Lymburner, Grauer, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008). I am pulling the poem out of its prior context here to reflect on as an example of ABER self-study that might also be seen as doing the work of contributing to the betterment of understanding how education works...or fails to work. The conclusion invites readers to consider how a critical perspective on these issues may assist arts-based educational researchers in side-stepping charges that might potentially be directed at the ABER community of elitism, solipsism and navel-gazing from within a larger North American culture arguably addicted to confession, self-revelation, narcissism and voyeurism.

### **Section One: Self-Study in ABER and the Artworld**

The world has to be ready for certain things, the artworld no less than the real one.

(Danto, 1964, p. 581)

Educational research has only relatively recently validated the practice of self-study, primarily through the development of *currere* and narrative inquiry, and more recently through the development of life writing. *Currere*, as theorized and practiced by Pinar (1975a, 1975b) created a radical shift in curriculum studies: "By taking oneself and one's existential experience as a data source and using psychoanalytical technique of free association, one can build not only a linear but a multidimensional biography based on conceptual and preconceptual experiences" (1975a, p. 1). Pinar and Grumet's (1976) theorizing and practicing of *currere* has phenomenological roots in Merleau-Ponty's (1962) call to "return to things in themselves" (p. ix) that, as a research method, "[requires] knowledge of self as knower of the world, attempting to trace the complex path from preconceptual experience to formal intellection" (Pinar et al., 1996, p. 415). This move to autobiography unfolded over the subsequent decades (and remains in flight in contemporary curriculum studies), and was joined in the 1990s and 2000s by narrative inquiry and its interest in shifting the discourse away from "measurement of student responses... How did educational experience come to be seen as something that could be measured in this way?" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. xxii). Clandinin & Connelly turned their focus toward the lives of teachers in schools: "There is no better way to study curriculum than to study ourselves" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p.

31; cited in Pinar et al., 1996, p. 515). Many other curriculum scholars added their voices to the work of understanding curriculum as autobiography: I refer the interested reader to Pinar et al.'s (1996) synoptic text and chapter on this topic (pp. 515-566).

It is relevant to note that the subsequent chapter in *Understanding Curriculum*, cited above, is titled "Understanding Curriculum as Aesthetic Text" (pp. 567-605), within which the path toward ABER can be traced and followed through the works of John Dewey, Elliot Eisner, Harry S. Broudy, Maxine Greene, Madeleine Grumet, Tom Barone, Elizabeth Vallance, Jan Jagodzinski and Donald Blumenfeld-Jones, among others. Speaking autobiographically, it was the reading of this chapter in my first graduate course in curriculum studies—taught by Pinar himself at the University of Victoria in 1999—that allowed me to begin to 'see' myself within this new field of study. As a theatre artist and high school drama teacher, the notion of studying curriculum was anathema to me: Curriculum was the enemy in efforts to free myself and my students to create theatre outside of the constraints of aims, outcomes and assessments. Reading through this chapter, and experiencing the whole course with Pinar, helped me understand that curriculum lives inside each teacher and student in more profound ways than it does in government documents or district policies. I was liberated to explore both curriculum and research as lived experience, and to begin a shift in career path that has led me to become a professor of drama/theatre education and a specialist in ABER methods, poetic and performative approaches in particular. While there are multiple historical pathways of ABER that are possible to trace (see Cahnmann-Taylor, 2008, pp. 3-15 for an alternate ABER history), my history is marked with these thinkers and practitioners, these milestones.

Pursuant to my first encounter with curriculum as autobiography and aesthetics were two years (2006-2008) I spent engaged in postdoctoral research on poetic inquiry at the University of British Columbia (UBC), supervised by prolific and influential arts-based/autobiographical scholar, life writer and poet Carl Leggo. Leggo's (2008) commitment to living poetically in the world resonates throughout his writing:

Poetry is a way of knowing and living, a way of examining lived experiences by attending to issues of identity, relationship, and community. Poetry acknowledges how the heart and imagination are always integral parts of human knowing. Poetry seeks the truth about human experience. (p. 171)

Leggo is a member of UBC's A/r/tography group, led by Rita Irwin (Irwin & deCosson, 2004; Irwin & Springgay, 2008). A/r/tography's development as an ABER method has created welcome space for artists in education to employ their artistic practice "as enacted living inquiry" (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005, p. 899):

Artists, researcher, teachers engaged in a/r/tography are living lives of inquiry: Lives full of curiosity punctuated by questions searching for deeper understandings while interrogating assumptions. ... Living inquiry refuses absolutes; rather, it engages with a continual process of not-knowing, of searching for meaning that is difficult and in tension. (pp. 901-902)

There is an assumption built into this method that researchers engaging with it have some kind of background in the arts: "In a/r/tography, this living inquiry is an aesthetic encounter, where the process of meaning making and being are inextricably connected to an awareness and understanding of art" (p. 902). While this has led to some charges of elitism against Irwin and her colleagues and students (see Jagodzinski & Wallin, 2013), a/r/tography has been defined and delineated as a method designed ideally for arts educators (although welcoming to others at all times).

The development of *arts-informed* ABER methods by adult educators Cole & Knowles (2008) at the University of Toronto created a middle ground for the use of the arts as a component of a research project without the prerequisite of mastery:

The central purposes of arts-informed research are to enhance understanding of the human condition through alternative (to conventional) processes and representational forms of inquiry, and to reach multiple audiences by making scholarship more accessible. The methodology infuses the languages, processes, and forms of literary, visual, and performing arts with the expansive possibilities of scholarly inquiry for purposes of advancing knowledge.... (p. 59)

If this development of ABER can be viewed as a continuum of sorts, with arts-informed research in the centre, then Susan Finley's locating of *arts-based inquiry* (2003, 2005) sits in counterbalance to a/r/tography. Finley (2008) posits that arts-based inquiry is less interested in the life of the researcher and more focused on how the arts serve oppressed or marginalized participants as forms of expression or liberatory praxis. "Arts-based inquiry is uniquely positioned as a methodology for radical, ethical, and revolutionary research that is futuristic, socially responsible, and useful in addressing social inequities" (p. 71). For Finley, the self-study aspects of ABER, along with interest in artistic process, are of less value than being part of "a revolutionary pedagogy to confront the oppressions of everyday life" (p. 73).

Artists who live and create outside of the academy, in the artworld, can be seen as more or less interested in self-study or in political activism on a continuum of their own. Setting aside the commonplace understanding that all art says something about the artist, a cursory survey of art practice in the western world reveals artists exploring the self as well as artists exploring



politics and society. Sometimes these processes occur concurrently, as in the work of visual artists Frida Kahlo, Robert Mapplethorpe and Cindy Sherman, for example. In the poetry section of the artworld, the anthology *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness*, edited by poet Carolyn Forché (1993), contains many autobiographical poems that illuminate human atrocities of war, injustice or degradation that were part of the poets' lives (see also Forché & Wu, 2014). "Poetic language attempts a coming to terms with evil and its embodiments, and there are appeals for a shared sense of humanity and collective resistance" (Forché, 2014, p. 24). The works of literary artists such as Charles Dickens, Franz Kafka, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Vladimir Nabakov, Maya Angelou and Maxine Hong Kingston, to name only a very few, are rooted in the contexts of these authors' actual lives. They may also weave themes of education, social equity and justice into their autobiographies or memoirs, as seen in Wole Soyinka's many books, or those by Frank McCourt or Taslima Nasrin. These writers' life stories echo with the socio-historical and cultural presents in which they were/are embedded, whether in Africa (Soyinka), Ireland and America (Mccourt) or moving from Bangladesh, to Sweden, America and India in the case of Nasrin. Thus, self-study in the artworld can be seen as, at times, focused on the larger responsibility of social science research, which in turn is tied to that of ABER; to understand and thereby potentially improve the social conditions, processes and practices of ourselves and others.

## **Section Two: A Reflective Case Study of an Autobiographical/Autoethnographical Poem**

Barone & Eisner lamented in 1997 that "more discussion of arts-based research occurs than do actual examples of it in action" (p. 76). While this scenario has markedly improved over the intervening years, it remains a good reminder from two founders of ABER methods to practice what we preach. This section of this paper presents one of my autobiographical/autoethnographical poems that is then considered for both its aesthetic and educative potential as an ABER 'creation'.

The poem below was previously published in a collaborative article written with a UBC graduate student in art education, Julie Lymburner, and a number of art education faculty members (see Prendergast, Lymburner, Grauer, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008). The essay is titled "Pedagogy of trace: Poetic representations of teaching resilience/resistance in arts education" and focuses on how the dialogue around teaching stories of difficulty (Fowler, 2006; Walsh, 2006)—rendered as autobiographical narrative, poetic transcription and poetic response—may lead to new insights into how both arts education teachers and faculty members encounter opportunities for resilience and/or resistance throughout their careers. My poem was written in response to a painful teaching story told by Julie (pp. 60-63) that I poetically transcribed (pp. 63-67) as a kind of 'coding' then responded to with a story of my

own, in poetic form:

**fat cow**

in 1998  
i left teaching  
after only five years  
in the classroom

the sense  
of failure  
in me  
to live  
as a teacher  
to survive  
is strong

a crack

i plaster over  
this pain-filled  
          fissure  
with teaching  
outside the system

in theatres  
in universities

but  
a crack  
is a crack

a stigma  
a scar

like the blackboard  
it is never  
quite erased

white shadows  
of smeared words  
leave  
their chalky traces

like fat cow  
that's what he called me  
my grade 10 English student  
in venomous careless  
teenage fury  
out loud  
in front of the class

because i what?  
asked him to move  
to another desk?

the details fade  
but  
not the shock  
and  
the flinch

then the absurdity

he is sent  
to the VP  
who calls  
as i struggle  
not to cry  
but  
rather to teach

she asks me  
over the phone  
to tell her  
what was said

to repeat the injury

to scar myself  
    with its  
encore performance  
    out loud  
in front of the class

she needs to know  
in order to punish

in order to punish  
she needs to know

i refuse to say  
the wounding words  
targeting my body  
    not my person

so i write them  
on a slip  
of paper  
fold it  
maybe tape it  
closed

send it  
to the office

my punishment?  
to write myself  
into being  
as a fat cow

not a teacher  
not even  
    a person

i am erased

replaced

by someone  
who is always  
on her guard

who becomes guarded  
who becomes a guard  
not a guide

i left teaching  
not because  
of this event

but it is the crack  
the scar  
the stigma  
the stigmata

that marks  
my failure  
to remain  
resilient  
&  
resistant  
in the classroom

to weather  
the disinterest  
and casual cruelty

of those few  
who  
so trapped  
in their own  
furies  
refuse  
to see

the humanity  
of those

who teach

who

refuse

to be taught

(pp. 67-70)

My interest in reprinting this poem here is in reframing it as a way of addressing the concerns of this essay and the ones grouped around it. How can this poem be seen as an example of ABER that holds aesthetic/poetic concerns in balance with an autobiographical/autoethnographical focus that also makes a (small) contribution to educational research; that is, to the ongoing mission to improve teaching and learning? Ultimately I am not in the best position to respond to this question, but I will make a couple of tentative remarks. First, the poem has consistently garnered not only a positive but visibly affective response whenever I have shared it at conferences or in classes. Women in particular seem to 'get' the poem at a more visceral level, sometimes accompanied by tears, which I find understandable given the nature of the student's insult replacing my female human body with that of a female bovine. Women in our culture are subjected to this kind of judgment and erasure daily. I have had a number of female colleagues and students seek me out to tell me, most often in private, that they too have had experiences similar to mine, and how damaging this kind of careless cruelty can be. I commented when sharing the poem during the ABER symposium at the American Educational Research Association conference last year (2013), as part of the group of essays published herein, that these colleagues and students almost always touched me on the arm, hand or shoulder as we spoke. There appeared to be a felt need to connect in a more intimate way than words alone could do. I am grateful to a colleague at the ABER symposium who noted in discussion that this act is a kind of validity for the poem, an embodied testament to its affective impact.

But the poem is not intended for women alone—men can be bullied by their students and the system as well—and its critical perspectives open up the personal event to the political contexts of discipline and punishment in education (see Foucault, 1978/1995), and to a kind of theatre of the absurd in the demand that I repeat the injury in order that the student be 'dealt with' by my vice-principal. In this way, the poem moves beyond the autobiographical/autoethnographical narrative of trauma and toward an analytical view that holds the system to account as much as (if not more than) the student who caused me harm. In another way, the poem also opens up a space for the sharing of difficult teaching stories; by taking the risk to share my story, I have found graduate students respond in kind and share stories in narrative, poetic, and/or dramatic ways that they tell me have been buried deep, sometimes for years.

This work is not intended to be therapeutic, although artistic process often has this ‘side-effect’. Rather, I see this work of using “fat cow” in my teaching as critical pedagogy in its attempt to illustrate that a) power dynamics in classrooms can cut both ways and that b) a prison-like system will engender prisoner-like responses of resistance (of course!) from students who are c) often very well aware of the snake oil society is selling wrapped up as medicine that is good for them (see Giroux, 2013). This is not to let this student off the hook in his actions; he was suspended from school and removed from my class. Interestingly, he showed up a couple of years later in a senior English class and although he was not a stellar student, we had no further problems between us. I cannot recall if he ever actually apologized to me. But the writing of the poem, many years later, engaged the workings of empathy that art making opens up; while I may always feel the pain of the insult, the larger perspective that revealed itself in the writing has had an ameliorating effect on me and on others. I might call this forgiveness.

To conclude this reflection I reiterate that, in a small way, this poem has done the layered work of a successful piece of ABER. It seems to have garnered the affective response of an effective artwork. It has a strong autobiographical/autoethnographical focus, as does much work in ABER, particularly at the a/r/tography end of the ABER continuum. Finally, it has done some good in the wider world of educational research, teaching and learning through my use of it as a prompt that invites graduate students to share their own teaching stories of difficulty (see also Fowler, 2006; Walsh, 2006). These stories, shared in creative ways in a safe space, allow students to better see their embeddedness in a system that needs lots of fixing, and also to find solidarity and strength in the collective determination to continue teaching, in spite of it all.

### **Conclusion: Self-Study in Narcissistic Times**

Is narcissism the “pathology of our time” (Tyler, 2007, p. 343)? There is no doubt that we in the developed world currently live in a popular culture obsessed with confession, voyeurism and rampant self-promotion. But there is also a case to be made that focus on emotional expression and therapeutic sharing is ‘good’ for all of us, in the act of repressing repression; masculinist and patriarchal ways of being have maintained a lack of affect as ‘appropriate’ behavior over many centuries in the west. There can be no doubt that educational research needs and benefits from the stories of lived experience offered in artful ways by researchers, teachers and learners. However, the vibrancy of the field of ABER practice is at risk if it falls into the seduction offered by a larger culture of rampant individuality that pervasively and persuasively suggests My Story is The Story.

I have attempted here to offer an historical perspective on the development of self-study in

educational research and a spectrum of ABER approaches that move from a greater to lesser focus on autobiography/autoethnography. I have also made some connections between self-study practices in the artworld as sources of *ars poetica* that Faulkner (2007) advocates with some force: "What I am arguing is that poetic truth is not only some extraction of exact words or phrases from interview transcripts or our personal experience but rather requires a more focused attention to craft issues" (p. 221). Cahnmann (2003) and Piirto (2002) make similar cases that attention to poetic craft when creating poems for research purposes serves the art form in tandem with the inquiry. These three poetic inquirers of note all offer autobiographical/autoethnographical poems to illustrate their positions in these articles; my use of a self-study poem in this setting resonates with their call for an attention to craft in ABER.

But craft, aesthetics and affective power should not be the sole goals of an arts-based researcher. Attention to how one's own story calls and responds to others and how these interconnected stories provide a deeper and clearer understanding of teaching and learning is part of our shared responsibilities as educational researchers. An ABER self-study that does not sufficiently and vigorously make these critical connections may be seen as having failed on the social science side of the doubled challenge of arts-based research, even if the artistic quality of the work may be deemed quite high. I agree wholeheartedly with Walt Whitman's world-enfolding *Song of Myself*, and can think of no better exemplar of an ABER praxis that generously opens up the Song of the Self to the Song of the Many and the All:

A learner with the simplest, a teacher of the thoughtfulest,  
A novice beginning yet experient of myriads of seasons,  
Of every hue and caste am I, of every rank and religion,  
A farmer, mechanic, artist, gentleman, sailor, quaker,  
Prisoner, fancy-man, rowdy, lawyer, physician, priest.

I resist any thing better than my own diversity,  
Breathe the air but leave plenty after me,  
And am not stuck up, and am in my place.

from *Song of Myself* by Walt Whitman, Verse 16



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### **About the Author**

Monica Prendergast, Ph.D., is associate professor of drama/theatre education at the University of Victoria. Monica's research publications can be found in many books, journals and research handbooks. She is the author, co-author or co-editor of four books to date and is currently co-editing a second anthology of poetic inquiry with Kate Galvin (Sense, in preparation). Her poetic inquiry work has appeared in *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Research in Drama Education*, *Cultural Studies* ← → *Critical Methodologies*, the *Journal of Aesthetic Education* and *IJEA*, among others. Monica can be reached at [mprender@uvic.ca](mailto:mprender@uvic.ca)

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## Doing Arts-Based Educational Research For The Public Good: An Impossible Possibility?

Donal O'Donoghue  
The University of British Columbia, Canada

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### Introduction

In a recent essay, written by Guy Nordenson on the occasion of the *Chris Burden Extreme Measures* retrospective exhibition at the New Museum New York City, Nordenson, a Princeton University professor of architecture and structural engineering, engaged in a playful discussion of Burden's 2002 sculpture, *Tyne Bridge*. He began by pointing out that this work is a precise replica of the actual Tyne Bridge in Newcastle upon Tyne in England, built to one-twentieth of the size of the actual bridge. He proceeded to say that Burden's *Tyne Bridge* "is not the kind of model that would be used to present the design to a client interested in funding such a bridge" (p. 86). Neither is it, he continued, "a working model of the kind used to test an engineering idea" (p. 86). But, said Nordenson, *Tyne Bridge* is doing work; it is doing work of a different kind. Like Burden's other Bridge sculptures, *Tyne Bridge*, explained Nordenson, "work[s] on us rather than for us" (p. 94). It provokes questions, activates curiosity, triggers the imagination, solicits responses, cultivates thought, and, specifically for Nordenson, "work[s] up an awareness of the awesome presence of the material reality we have made around ourselves - and the joy this can give us when as boys (and girls) we can lose ourselves in the details of their construction" (p. 94). In other words, the artwork provides

an infinite space of possibilities where questions can be asked, uses imagined, and scenarios played out. For me, Nordenson's reading of the work does two things: First, it demonstrates that there is no single or absolute meaning to be gleaned from the work; no one overarching or underpinning significance that hovers above, behind or beneath the work as it lives in the contexts in which it is placed, in the circumstances in which it is brought into visibility and made intelligible, and in the situations that it produces. Second, it points to how Burden's *Tyne Bridge* is available for many interpretations.

Reading Nordenson's interpretation of Burden's *Tyne Bridge*, and paying attention, in particular, to how he did his interpretative work reminded me a lot of the nature of arts-based educational research outputs and how they tend to do their work. They do their work in a way that makes it difficult to claim that arts-based educational research outputs address societal needs and contribute to the public good — the theme of this special issue. By this I mean the following: Arts-based educational research outputs, for the most part, are of limited value for understanding a whole host of problems and challenges facing education today. Specifically, they do not offer answers or point to solutions to educational problems, just as Burden's *Tyne Bridge*, according to Nordenson, would be of little help to the engineer keen on testing an engineering idea, or the client interested in funding its construction. But, yet, like Burden's *Tyne Bridge*, (specifically Nordenson's reading of it), arts-based educational research outputs do something. They do something important for education: To use Nordenson's words, "[they] work on us rather than for us" (p. 94), and, it seems to me, they operate in ways more akin to the work of the intellectual than to the work of the researcher, even though they often emerge from research situations. Consider the following example. At the 2013 American Educational Research Association (AERA) Annual Meeting symposium entitled, *What does it mean to have an N of 1? Art-making, education research and the public good*, which is the subject of this special issue, one of the panel members and co-organizer of the symposium, Monica Prendergast read an autobiographical poem to a packed room; to an audience of educational researchers sympathetic, we might say, to what the arts can offer for illuminating educational situations and conditions; an audience receptive to the promise offered by poetry (in and through its own specific way of telling) for knowing more and knowing differently about things that matter in teaching lives. The poem, entitled *fat cow*, spoke to the difficult work of education. Specifically, it focused on one teacher's will to live on as a teacher in the face of inhospitable experiences that refused to fully disappear no matter how far they receded into the background of her teaching life. Judging from the audience's reaction, *fat cow* created for many present what Peter deBolla (2001) calls a "somatic response" – a response, he explains that is characterized by a "sensation akin to tingling, a kind of spinal overexcitation, or curious shudder – that involuntary somatic spasm referred to in common speech by the phrase "someone walking on one's grave" (p. 2). In other words, it did something important.

While it narrates a teaching event, Prendergast's poem is strictly not an analysis of a teacher's life, a teaching situation, or school life more generally. Yet, it reveals aspects of the school world, the experience of teaching and the nature of relations that can occur between various school actors under certain conditions. It could be read as an account of one teacher's becoming and what becomes of the teacher in that process (Britzman 2009). As the poem invites us to consider the systems of power within schooling – the powers of the institution and how it finds form in practices, rituals and exchanges; the power the student in the face of powerlessness (of being asked to moved to another seat); the power of the teacher to make determinations and demands on students; and the power that runs through these interactions and exchanges so beautifully attended to in the poem — in and through one teaching experience, it points to the fact that there are things to learn about school by paying attention to what has happened to others there. As it tells something of the experience of living in relation to others within a school context, while not necessarily living like them, it does not provide the types of contextual information (in an epilogue or prologue) that readers of research normally expect, nor does it make available to us “the logic of inquiry and activities that led from the development of the initial interest, topic, problem, or research question” (AERA 2006, p. 33). And, yet, it works on many levels without having a specific mandate.

While the poem has its own character and belongs to a tradition, nonetheless it opens a space for the author to recall vividly, to tell evocatively, and to invite others to connect or align their experiences with hers, as it reveals a quality of a schooling experience of educating and being educated. While it provides an account of an event, witnessed by others, and felt deeply by the writer, the content of the poem is not the event as experienced, observed, sensed, or felt, but rather an interpretation, construction, an organization of remembrances, feelings and reactions. The form of the poem imposes a particular reading practice and a listening experience as one is led from one sentence to another, image to image, through the poem's rhythm, sound, diction, word patterns. For that reason we might say that the production of the poem never ceases, that it is always being brought into existence, being produced again and again in the contexts in which it is shared, read, made sense of, connected to the experiences of others, remembered, and extended into and out of practice. It lives a life away from and in spite of the intentions of its author, as it becomes entangled in the lives of others, as it operates to cultivate thought, influence action, shape practice without ever insisting on a course of action. In other words, the poem is an assemblage of many factors that come together with the potential to create a response — affective, cognitive and otherwise. As receivers of the poem, we are always governed to a certain degree by its form, a form with its own history.

Reading Prendergast's poem, we realize that it does not offer answers or point to solutions to problems of school structure and power (the teacher's, the student's and the administrator's in

that moment). To exist as it does, it connects with things outside of itself (stories of teaching, experiences of being humiliated, feelings of powerlessness and embarrassment, hope and hopelessness), and it maintains relations with such things. Following Sartre, we might read the poem (and the writing of it) as an act of taking leave of the situation that it narrates. Or, perhaps we might view it (and the reciting of it) as an act of conquering that very situation, of coming out the other end, scarred but still standing. And yet, the act of thinking and writing the poem entails more than remembering, recalling, positioning and repositioning, taking leave or conquering the experience again, but differently; it involves imaginatively weaving past experiences with current situations within which past experiences come to life and light differently; for these experiences come into being in and through the manner in which they are called up, shaped and given form within an existing form that has a history and a tradition. In other words, the act of doing, of making within a form does something. It lends itself to coming to know.

As this example demonstrates, arts-based educational research outputs have the capacity to move us in ways that connect us with aspects of our lives as teachers and learners. Time and again, they create opportunities for us “to rediscover the world in which we live . . . which we are prone to forget” (Merleau-Ponty 2004, p. 31-32). They have the capacity to call into presence particular educational situations and conditions. It is for this reason that I cautiously considered the invitation to “address how ABER [Arts-Based Educational Research] work connects with and/or directly addresses society’s need/s and the public good”, which I was asked to address as a panel member on the aforementioned 2013 AERA symposium, *What does it mean to have an N of 1? Art-making, education research and the public good*. Undoubtedly, something is being brought into being in the process of attending to ABER’s capacity to contribute to the betterment of society. Inviting others to speculate on how ABER might function as a public good as it explicitly addresses social and political issues of importance to the current time opens a space for discussion and deliberation about what ABER does. While the invitation to “address how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society’s need/s and the public good”, seems, at first, straightforward, on reflection, it is complex and complicated in nature. This nature of this invitation, then, is the subject of this paper. The paper is speculative in nature. In it, I argue that this invitation should be both cautiously welcomed and keenly resisted.

### ***Conditions for Participation in the 2013 AERA Symposium***

When invited to participate in this symposium, I was curious about what this turn to the public good in ABER was in aid of, and what it might produce. I still am. Perhaps, I thought, a good place to begin to work out this curiosity is by engaging in some question-work and speculative thinking. Might, for example, we say, that this turn to the public good is an effort establish new visibilities for ABER in the field of educational research, while retaining and

strengthening existing ones? Might this turn to the public good establish new hierarchies and new inclusion and exclusion criteria as it idealizes certain purposes and outcomes of, and for ABER? Does it mean that some arts-based education research outputs will be considered more valuable and more relevant than other arts-based educational research outputs, some more desirable and useful than others? And what might be the fate of ABER inquiries and outputs that do not adhere to this new found purpose for ABER? Does it mean that the potential of the work that doesn't seem to fit within the desired outputs and outcomes of ABER is lost? Most radically, might this turn to the public good give arts-based educational researchers an entirely different purpose for doing and disseminating their work, and thus lead to its eradication, as we know it? Is it another example of arts-based educational researchers trying to find a purpose for their methodology, a purpose that aligns more closely with justifications for conducting educational research than reasons for pursuing research-based art? Is so, we might say that this could have the effect of normalizing ABER within the family of educational research methodologies and, one might suggest, participates in the eradication of arts-based education research as we know it, and the possibilities it offers for knowing differently and differently knowing (Lather, 2007). Surely, searching for ways to be recognized by other educational research methodologies, or to align closely with them, especially dominant methodologies, is not going to minimize the dominance of these dominant methodologies, is it? Might this turn be read as an effort to stabilize the identity of ABER in a particular way, thereby assigning arts-based education research a certain character; a character that could possibly immobilize it and forecloses possibilities for it to be otherwise, which ultimately makes it vulnerable to manipulation. In many respects, the language of ABER as a public good connects with discourses of the 'free-market', 'market economies' and neoliberalism. To be able to clearly identify arts-based educational research outputs as public good makes them more amenable to being goods that can be exchanged, and accrue value in the process. On the other hand, might this turn be viewed as an opportunity to invigorate the field of ABER?

As I thought about the nature of what I would offer in the symposium, I first wanted to understand what is meant when we speak of the public good; do we have shared understandings of what that term and concept implies and demands of us as researchers and scholars? For one could claim that all research, no matter how large or small in size and scope, is conducted in the interests of the public good, but, of course, that does not mean that it is automatically a public good, or that it serves all groups in the public sphere in the same way or in equal measure. Further, one could say there is widespread public trust that academics will undertake research and teach for the public good; as Kathleen Lynch (2006) says, "there is a hope and expectation that those who are given the freedom to think, research and write will work for the good of humanity in its entirety" (p. 11), although the questions then becomes, 'which public' and 'whose good', both of which are very contested terms?



There is no disputing that as scholars, we work with intent; Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1993) reminds us of this, when she wrote, “I think many adults (and I among them) are trying, in our work, to keep faith with vividly remembered promises made to ourselves in childhood: promises to make invisible possibilities and desires visible: to make the tacit thing explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and, with the relative freedom of adulthood, to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged” (p. 3). Therefore, to suggest that arts-based educational researchers pay attention to how their work contributes to the public good, to the advancement of knowledge and understandings that benefit the public at large is, one might suggest, not an unreasonable suggestion. Yet, given the nature of the arts and how they operate, isn’t it a difficult imposition to place on ABER, which is a methodology closely aligned to art and its discourses. The arts have provided ABER not only with an identity but also with a purpose, and it is for that reason that art’s (my concern in this essay is primarily visual art) indeterminate, unknowable, elusive, and unpredictable nature cannot be ignored in any discussion of how ABER can, cannot, or ought to contribute to the public good. Given that the above-mentioned examples (Prendergast’s poem, *fat cow* and Nordenson’s reading of Burden’s *Tyne Bridge*) show it is impossible to predict in advance, and with any great accuracy, the manner in which an artwork, or an ABER output, might impact its audience, or contribute insights of a positive and productive nature for issues of concern in today’s world, educational or otherwise. And, further, given that ABER outputs, like artworks, need to be engaged with for them to mean something, we ought to consider what it means to bring the concept of the public good into our conversation about doing ABER and to posit it as a primary purpose for the work that we do. But, first, to an examination of some understandings of the concept of ‘the public good’.

### ***Understanding the Public Good in the Context of Research***

What does it mean to do educational research for the public good when ‘a public good’ is defined in the following way? A public good, says Per Pinstrup–Anderson (2000), has two characteristics. One, it is “non-rivalrous” (Suber, 2009) which means “the consumption of the good by an individual does not detract from that of another” (n.p.); and, two, it is “non-excludable” (Suber, 2009), meaning, “that it is impossible or at least very difficult to exclude anybody from consuming the good” (n.p.). Pinstrup–Anderson (2000) suggests that knowledge derived from research is, for the most part, non-rivalrous; but, of course, for knowledge to be non-rivalrous it needs to be disseminated and made available, which in some cases means that it needs to be translated so that it is available without restriction, and reaches into and across different “discourse communities” (Provencal, 2011). And, as we know, the distribution of knowledge is a more complicated affair: Pinstrup–Anderson (2000) reminds us, “generators of knowledge . . . or distributors of knowledge attempt to limit access to specific knowledge to those who are willing to pay” (n.p.) Oftentimes, it is those with access to

appropriate resources that are best-positioned to access such knowledge, initially at least. Further, not all knowledge produced by research is disseminated. As we know, journal editors and editorial review boards play a crucial gatekeeping role in determining what gets published in particular forums at particular times. Through editorials, invited submissions and special issues, they also play a key role in creating conditions whereby knowledge is assessed in a certain way, through which it accrues value and usefulness. Kathryn Borman, Arnold Danzig, and David Garcia (2012), in a special issue of *Review of Educational Research*, suggest that to engage in educational research that “serve greater public purposes” the researcher needs to do work that is beyond individual self-interest. This builds on the epigraph that they introduce at the beginning of their editorial, a maxim by George H. Mead: “To be interested in the public good we must be disinterested, that is, not interested in goods in which our personal selves are wrapped up”. I will return to this idea in a moment. Similarly, Jon Nixon (2011) sees the public good as “a good that, being more than the aggregate of individual interests, denotes a common commitment to social justice and equality” (p. 1), although he goes further to suggest that the public good “involves complex moral and political judgments regarding what constitutes the good for the polity as a whole” (p. x).

It seems to me that for research outputs to be a public good, they need to directly contribute to the solution of existing problems by offering ‘relevant’ and ‘useful’ knowledge for the purpose of solving such problems. This would mean that to do research explicitly for the public good, to address societal needs, and ultimately contribute to the betterment of society is to inquire into a problem that already exists, one that has been identified as a problem, and one that holds the possibility of being solved. No small order! But as researcher, Leah Bassel (2013) says, “more information and better understanding would not simply make the problem go away when research is disseminated and goes public” (n.p). Similarly, and from a different disciplinary perspective and context, Tim Ingold (2013) reminds us, “The mere provision of information holds no guarantee of knowledge, let alone understanding” (p. 1). As a researcher who engages diverse communities in community-based research, Bassel, like several other researchers, is most interested in how these terms ‘public’ and ‘good’ get constituted and deployed in the service of research. For her, it is a matter of whose public and whose good ultimately informs research. And, for Jenson (2006), some of the most significant major challenges of conducting research in the interest of the public good are, he says, “designing and implementing investigations that are compatible with the goals of public service; applying rigorous research designs in real-world settings; creating university–community partnerships; and disseminating the results of investigations.” (p. 195).

To explicitly conduct research for the public good means, as alluded to earlier, to align one’s research program with issues of social and political importance of the day. This involves building partnerships with groups other than and in addition to research participants in

advance of conducting research, and requires a strong sense of the conditions of the nature of the research to be conducted and its methodologies (Jenson, 2006). To conduct research for the public good is to engage in research that is expected to do something, something that is recognizable and intelligible through current systems of recognition and reward. It is, one might say, problem and solution driven research. It is an orientation to research that casts the research in a particular light. To some degree it suggests that the researcher and intellectual are not one of the same being. For if we have to make an explicit commitment to doing research for the public good (and make public this commitment) as opposed to doing research to contribute to bodies of knowledge in scholarly and intellectual fields that are part of the public world at any rate, then we are not living the life of the intellectual as theorized by Edward Said. Despite some of the criticisms leveled against Said's conceptualization of the intellectual (see Walzer, 1994), his belief that the intellectual "is an individual endowed with a faculty for representing, embodying, articulating a message, a view, an attitude, philosophy or opinion to, as well as for, a public . . . [an individual] whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot easily be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d'être* is to represent all those people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug" (Said 1994, p. 11) is useful for my argument here. Further, for Said, the intellectual "is neither a pacifier nor a consensus-builder, but someone whose whole being is staked on a critical sense, a sense of being unwilling to accept easy formulas, or ready-made clichés, or the smooth, ever-so-accommodating confirmations of what the powerful or conventional have to say, and what they do" (p. 23).

So, we might say that the intellectual is always working for, on behalf of, and in the interests of the public, and therefore this invitation to "address how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society's need/s and the public good" somehow separates the researcher from the intellectual. An implied separation is assumed in the invitation because if the arts-based educational researcher is an intellectual, then it would mean that s/he is already committed to acting in the public interest and for the public, driven by the understanding that "all human beings are entitled to expect decent standards of behaviour concerning freedom and justice from worldly powers or nations, and that deliberate or inadvertent violations of these standards need to be testified and fought against courageously" (Said 1994, 11-12); to which Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's purpose for doing intellectual work, cited earlier, was committed.

To return to Borman et al's (2006) idea that to conduct research that "serve[s] greater public purposes" and by default, the public good, the researcher needs to do work that is beyond individual self interest, let us consider the implications of this commitment for arts-based educational researchers. Because arts-based educational researchers, for the most part, are

committed to inquiring into educational issues using art practices and processes, and draw heavily on the inquiry and representational practices of artists, a brief discussion of how artists connect with the demands of producing work for the public good is warranted.

### **Producing Art as a Public Good**

There are several examples of artworks that take on problems of the world in order to think differently about them and present them in a manner not previously presented. Carol Becker (2002) provided an account of several such examples, which, she said, “expose society’s inherent contradictions” in their refusal to uphold or maintain the status quo (p. 17). A more current example is the Chicago-based artist, Theaster Gates, who, similar to the Houston-based artist Rick Lowe's work *Project Row Houses*, has taken on the project of restoring and renovating abandoned buildings in the Southside of Chicago. He transforms them into cultural spaces that also act as meeting spaces for those who live in the neighborhood.. There is no doubt that Gates’ work contributes to the public good given that it provides individuals from vulnerable populations and communities with access to worlds and resources that would not otherwise be easily available. Gates, we might say, is creating in and for the public, while simultaneously pursuing and attending to his own capacity to appear in the art world (see Colapinto, 2013). But, is the work a public good measured against the criteria presented earlier. Is it that we need different criteria for establishing art’s capacity to contribute to the public good and to be a public good? Similarly, an explicit purpose of socially engaged design practice — an approach to design which has in recent years gained much attention and prominence — is to create more equitable, inclusive and enabling ways of being in the world for everybody, especially those who are most vulnerable in our society. For example, from October 2010 to January 2011, the Museum of Modern Art, New York staged an exhibition called *Small Scale Big Change: New Architectures of Social Engagement* which documented the work of several architects who researched, designed and supervised the building of schools, museums and residential units in various underserved communities across five continents. These architects engaged in participatory design practices, advanced a model of architectural practice that was in line with socially engaged and transformative politics and pursued ecological and socially sustainable building practices (see author forthcoming). While just one example of several that I could draw upon, this one appears to clearly constitute a public good, as the works produced in it are socially informed and promote civic engagement and participation. That said, the extent to which these research-based designed structures are non rivalrous and made available without restriction is not easy to determine.

Notwithstanding the significant contributions that artists have made to raise awareness of social and political inequalities and injustices and to go some way in changing them through artistic interventions, the structure of the art world and the manner in which careers and names are made require artists to have a keen self interest in the work they produce, where it is

exhibited, how it is situated with the broader realm of art practice, how it is received, and written into being, even though they (artists) can never predict with any great accuracy how work will be interpreted, positioned and accrue value; and this is the world from where arts-based educational researchers draw inspiration and guidance. A similar scenario could be sketched to describe the conditions in which academics work, especially working within the tenure and promotion process in North American universities. As a result of art world expectations and systems of reward and recognition, many artists produce work that is of individual self-interest and gain. For the reason that artists' reputations are built on the work that they do, can we ever say that they pursue art making without individual self-interest? As Giorgio Agamben (1999), drawing on the self-reported experiences of Hölderlin, Van Gogh and Rilke, says, "For the one who creates . . . what is at stake seems to be not in any way the production of a beautiful work but instead the life and death of the author, or at least his or her spiritual health" (p. 5). And while, as Carol Becker (2002) points out, we have several and varying images of what an artist is and does, we do not tend to view "artists as socially concerned citizens of the world", although this might be changing with the growth of socially engaged art practice. We might say, then, that to take up a disinterested position in relation to the outcomes of one's work is not something that many contemporary artists can do easily. Further, while an artist's role is a public one (Becker 2002), few artists will adjust readily to the hopes that others have of, or for them. Neither are many artists prone to work in ways that will satisfy public expectations. As is the case with art, we can point to examples of ABER that has contributed to the public good, but to explicitly make visible how it has, how it can, or how ABER research yet to be done will contribute to addressing societal needs is a step in a different direction. Earlier, I suggested that the invitation to "address how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society's need/s and the public good", should be both cautiously welcomed and keenly resisted. It is for the reasons that follow that I make such a suggestion.

### ***Implications of Considering Arts-Based Educational Research as a Public Good***

ABER's focus at this time on the public good might be seen as an attempt to cultivate a deeper level of thoughtfulness and critical reflection about this practice of inquiry and mode of representation. This focus on doing research for the betterment of society might be understood as an attempt to foster a more deliberative engagement with ABER practices, practitioners, modes of assessment and evaluation that, in turn, might result in a shift in small ways in the terms by which we engage ABER as a concept or practice, hence the reason why we ought to cautiously welcome it. In some respects, the invitation to "address how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society's need/s and the public good" recognizes the role that art has played in society at various times in the past, times in which "the artist was seen as a shaper of our cultural world, setting it's limits and giving it form" (de la Durantaye (2009, p. 37). Agamben (1999) provides several examples of when art in the past

was seen as dangerous and its power to impact the social and moral well being of citizens was feared. Citing a passage from Plato's Republic, which he says is "often invoked when speaking of art", Agamben (1999) explains, "The power of art over the soul seemed to [Plato] so great that he thought it could by itself destroy the very foundations of his city" (p. 4). For that reason, it could perhaps be suggested that this invitation to consider how ABER might function as a public good provides a chance to articulate differently the nature and reach of ABER as well as its potential. It offers a chance to consider how changing definitions and practices of art can inform the continuing development of ABER, especially such practices as socially engaged art, participatory art practice, and collaborative art practice, all of which connect, in varying ways, to the social while promoting the virtues of collective action and deliberative decision-making and civic engagement. When ABER was first imagined and articulated as a possibility for doing educational research, such art practices were not as prevalent, advanced or well theorized as they are today, hence the reason why it might be time to turn toward the social. Emphasizing how ABER operates for the betterment of society, how it can or ought to address societal needs and problems prompts us to consider more carefully the relationship between doing, representing, disseminating and creating conditions for understanding and action. Perhaps this invitation to consider how ABER might function as a public good is borne out of a desire to increase arts-based education research's visibility within and outside the field of education research. Of course, greater visibility leads to opportunities for greater policing. While identifying some of the possibilities offered by the invitation to consider and "address how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society's need/s and the public good", we should also ask what are some of the less productive implications of this invitation for how we do our work as arts-based education researchers; how we talk about that work; and how we and others evaluate it.

The emphasis, then, on creating and pursuing ABER for the public good might also be perceived as a "forgetting of art" (Agamben, p. 43); and, to a large extent, a forgetting of the nature and actuality of conducting research with and about art. By attending to how the work of inquiry and its representation meets certain criteria (such as public good or the betterment of society) already established in advance of the research endeavor itself, rather than focusing on what methods, processes, materials (the material specificities of art, we might say) suggest and where they lead us is an approach to conducting ABER with a different emphasis; different from the one we have grown into and grown used of. With a firm focus on identifying and conveying (in advance of, and following the research process) how the research outputs will contribute to the act of solving social or political concerns at hand, there does not seem to be much space available for surrendering to the making process itself, and paying attention to the act of thinking through making. The latter has been one of the most treasured qualities and affordances of ABER. As Tim Ingold (2013) reminds us, "materials think in us as we think through them" (p. 6). They lead us places, show us possibilities, and

alter their own nature when they come into contact with or become absorbed by other materials. This attentive way of being with and in the company of materials and inquiry practices, where one is never fully separate from the other is a disposition that Ingold, drawing from the work of Hirokazu Miyazaki especially his “method of hope”, might call “correspondence”. As he describes it, “to practice this method [Miyazaki’s method of hope] is not to describe the world, or to represent it, but to open up our perception to what is going on there so that we, in turn, can respond” (p. 7). Further, as Becker (2002) reminds us, quality of execution matters for the extent to which a work can be “emotionally, intellectually, and aesthetically available to a more heterogeneous audience” (p. 18).

The expectation that ABER could and would contribute to, and directly address societal problems could easily be co-opted as a criterion by which arts-based educational researchers and others can make judgments regarding the efficacy of ABER outputs and outcomes. Further, it could become a dominant means by which to identify ABER’s value, and articulate its usefulness. For that reason, one might suggest that the invitation to consider how ABER directly contributes to the betterment of society is not so much an invitation to consider what ABER does in the situations in which it is produced, in which it finds form, and in which it interacts with other knowledge systems and traditions (as we saw with Prendergast’s poem, *fat cow*), but rather one that invites us to consider how ABER impacts situations outside of itself. Might this even suggest that we will be obliged to see value in arts-based education and research practice only on the bases of what it can contribute to some notion of the public good, regardless of its capacity to move those who encounter it? So in other words, this focus on the public good at this time might be perceived as a mechanism to monitor and judge the quality of ABER, and the contribution that it can make to the larger field of educational research. The work practices and the outcomes of arts-based educational researchers (and its critics and supporters) might end up becoming more concerned with the extent to which it meets this expectation.

To engage in further speculation, we might wonder what types of evaluative processes will be established to identify and distinguish arts-based educational research that contributes to the public good from that which does not? Will it be the case that the determination of value and the evaluation of quality will be arrived at solely by looking for evidence outside of the nature of arts-based educational research itself (its capacity to awaken and sustain interest in issues of concern in education)? What kinds of communities of inquirers might this commitment to arts-based educational research enable, support, house, protect, defend?

In our efforts to think about how arts-based educational research might contribute to the betterment of society, we, too, should think about whether it is even possible for ABER to contribute in this way. In other words, can we rely on research-based artworks to convey

information of importance that directly serves the public good? While acknowledging that ABER outputs are different from artworks, even though they might closely resemble them (and like artworks they have the capacity to contribute to and shape the nature of the lives that we lead), ABER outputs, like artworks, on their own, can never fully or adequately reveal or convey much information or understandings that would be directly instructive to the formation of educational policy. Moreover, like artworks, ABER outputs, as we saw with Prendergast's poem, come into presence again and again, and differently each time as they are accessed, interpreted or placed in relation to other works. For that reason, they may make rather unreliable sources for making decisions and creating policy that impact the lives of others.

### **Conclusion**

This invitation to participate in a discussion about doing arts-based educational research for the public good suggests to me that ABER, while continually expanding, diversifying, coming into being again and again and differently each time, could be more than it actually is; that it could extend its reach further, and participate in arenas in which it has previously not participated. This might come at a cost. More specifically, for me, the nature of the invitation to consider how ABER might function as a public good and the conditions for participation in the 2013 AERA symposium amplify the inherent contradiction in much of the conceptual work underpinning the notion of arts-based educational research. On the one hand, there is a belief that the arts can contribute important and necessary insights about education, its practice and its conditions, and that these outcomes are agents of change. For instance, a recurring theme in much of the ABER literature (including the rationales advanced for this methodology) is that art opens the world to us in good and productive ways. Further it is assumed that art has the capacity to extend what we know and deepen our current understanding in ways that are good for our well-being, and our capacity to live ethically with one another in the world as we strive for a more equal and just world. But, of course, art, too, as the recent riots in Tunisia (June 2012) demonstrate, can be read as offensive and insulting, cause outrage and anger, lead to the public unrest, public protest and public condemnation. On the other hand, there is a belief that arts' aesthetic qualities, their separateness from everyday life, their capacity to activate the sensory involvement of others (educators, policy makers, etc.) makes them a productive means for representing educational situations, conditions, concerns and insights. Herein lies the contraction: ABER stands with and in opposition to the traditional aesthetic paradigm.

It is difficult to argue against the fact that for ABER to contribute new insights or different understandings of education and its conditions, it has to engage with the problems and possibilities of education in a way that is relevant and important to the field at any given time. However, an emphasis on the public good might (which is emerging at this time), will likely



force a restructuring of ABER in ways that run contrary to the practice of this approach to inquiry in the first place. While building alliances with other research and artistic communities and genres is always to be welcomed, it cannot be done at the expense of losing ABER's potency. To put ABER in the service of something else means that we believe that its value lies outside of itself, in its capacity to address something that is not related to it. Attempts to figure out "how ABER work connects with and/or directly addresses society's need/s and the public good" might be viewed as a project of assimilation (assimilating ABER with other methodological approaches in the field of educational research), rather than as a project of amplification. Of course the argument has been made that art practice is a form of research (Sullivan 2010), but that doesn't mean that it is equivalent or corresponds closely, in its form and purpose, to the types of research practices commonly used by educational and social science researchers. The push for an examination of how ABER corresponds with and resembles other educational research methodologies might not be the most productive path to take on the road to establishing a stronger, more credible visible presence in the field of educational research. ABER cultivates particular ways of doing and thinking, as well as promoting particular practices of organization and representation. Arts-based educational research involves a commitment to figuring things out in as well as by working with and through art making practices and processes and artistic modes of inquiry. Like artworks, ABER outputs (or their impacts), for the most part, can neither be predicted nor understood in advance. Two questions of importance that this invitation to consider how ABER might function as a public good raised for me are: (i) *How do we prepare arts-based educational researchers to do ABER work*; and (ii) *How do we create conditions for diverse audiences to access the work of ABER and build meaningful relations with it*. Perhaps the pursuit of both questions is our next step.

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**About the Author**

Dónal O'Donoghue is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Vancouver, Canada, and a faculty member of Green College at UBC. His research interests are in art and design education, art-led research and scholarship, and masculinities. At UBC, he serves as Chair of Art Education.

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

## Editors

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## Dancing the Threshold from Personal to Universal

Celeste Snowber  
Simon Fraser University, Canada

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### Dancing the Threshold from Personal to Universal

How do we connect the personal and universal and how is intentionality connected to its union? The dilemma of connecting the personal and the universal has been one grappled by artists, poets, and performers for ages, but now questions come to us as ABER scholars, artists and educators to inquire where these connections are located. My philosophical underpinning has sought ways to connect the personal and universal, private and public and my scholarly, performance and poetic work has been rooted in the tradition of the lived curriculum and the soil of autobiography. This soil has always had the ingredient that our stories have the capacity to utter one another, and form and inform one another. My expression is not only for my own well-being, but a way I can both listen and offer a gift, an entrance point for someone else, to access their own understanding, perception, and perhaps be moved in some way (Snowber, 2005, Richmond & Snowber, 2009). This is the paradox, beauty and mystery of interconnecting autobiographical work, whether that is poetic, narrative, artistic or embodied ways of inquiry for others and ourselves.

The invitation to be deeply human is what I would see as an ethics *within* our aesthetics. The

call to humanness calls forth an interconnection to the world and opens up the capacity to stand in an ecological stance in connecting inner and outer landscapes. Engagement in arts-based practices beckons the researcher, artist, scholar and educator to live in the garden of hospitality. Hospitality requires a sensibility of the other, said so beautifully by essayist Nancy Mairs (1989) many years ago, the gift of autobiography and narrative “invites you into the house of my past, and the threshold you cross leads you into your own” (p. 11).

I have thought of her statement for over fifteen years now as I have plunged deeply into the land of arts-based research and known there must always be a consciousness of connection of the personal to the universal and as an educator to bring my students to these interconnections where the landscape of the inner life and creativity are broken open to pedagogy. My invitation to students, colleagues and myself is to let out our narratives, and in particular our body narratives within education, but always to co-create a better world, one more human, creative and filled with the possibility of being more conscious and generative.

The focus of my work for many years has been rooted in embodied forms of inquiry; the body is messy, filled with delight and difficulty. Even as I write this piece I need to attend to a deep listening to what is going on within my body. I have been diagnosed with a pulsing tinnitus, and as much as I dislike the restraints of a health issue, the pulsing sound within my head opens up connections to other parts of my body, including the relationship to kidneys, ears, and blood flow. Everything is connected, and it is often in coming up against a limit or health issue, one is reminded to the importance of all systems working together. The body calls one to grow inward, grow down into the roots of ones soul, but only to be brought forth to others to see, just as the foxglove or hibiscus breaks forth from the soil. These are important questions as a field that must be addressed, and I welcome the opportunity to begin to unravel the ethics of connecting autobiographical work within the field of arts-based research to a larger purpose, which can be nurtured and illuminated.

For years I have explored the body, dance, movement and aspects of physicality, as a way of embodied inquiry. My curiosity continues to lie in not only what I know, but more importantly in what I don't know. Embodied ways of knowing have a huge capacity to open up places of a visceral wisdom, which has the potential to connect heart, soul, imagination, mind and body. I have said many times, “we do not have bodies, we are bodies,” and embodied places of inquiry open up a phenomenological understanding of who one is and who one is becoming. I have always been grateful for my heritage within the field of curriculum studies, and connections to phenomenology, and I believe these fields are foundational to arts-based research methods and arts-based inquiry. Body knowledge and body wisdom is somewhat of an endangered species in our world, particularly in the academic world, and there has been more emphasis on the outer body, what one looks like, rather than the felt body, or what would be called the “lived body,” in more phenomenological terms. It

is the lived body, which becomes the place of knowing, and the place that allows the skin, belly, fingers, feet, and shoulders to become the place of deep listening and expression. There is a body intelligence, which the mover and dancer can explore in the relationship between the body's capacity for insight, perception and understanding. This said, it is crucial, there is first, a somatic connection to one's own personal experience, before connecting to the other. They go hand in hand, foot in foot, and work very much together, just as the relationship between my kidneys, liver, ears, throat and sinuses work in connection to one another. I would liken the connection from the personal and universal to the blood in the body. We need the blood to survive. And there is going to be an arts-based methodology, or any other, it will need the blood to flow from the personal to the universal to be relevant and sustainable.

I was told by the ENT (Ears Nose and Throat) specialist a week ago that my pulsatile tinnitus may be connected to the architecture of blood flow, and thus the reason for more significant tests. Yet this metaphor of the blood is capturing my attention as I think about the juxtaposition between having our own personal inquiry connected to the larger community, however one articulates, whether that is the school, neighborhood, university or culture. Delving into the autobiographical and personal is an inquiry into opening up all the cracks of our lives; both personal and professional. I have never been one of those teachers or writers who could separate the events of my life from the classroom, whether that is a loss of a loved one, transition, or health issue. I have found myself teaching through tiredness, tears, and times of elation. Lament has had its place in my published writing as well as my classroom. My own availability to my own grief has allowed others to honor their own life passages that include loss and the significance to them in terms of opening up both their personal and teaching lives. The opportunity to honor all the fabric of our lives, propels one to what truly matters – a call to have voice and archive the lived curriculum. The many lessons in life, whether through a pedagogical possibility, the natural world, or within an intimate connection with another bare weight and levity to what it means to be human. And in this amazing project of humankind, we are invited into the interconnection and interdependence of this fragile and beautiful life. This is a humble endeavor, and I recognize the relationship between these words: human, humus and humor. My hope and fire in my heart is there can be both lightness and heaviness in the circulatory network of the call to be arts-based researchers, who honor what matters both individually and collectively.

My own research practice has taken me into exploring dance and poetry within site-specific work and creating performances outside in the natural world. My practice of walking an inlet around a body of water in Port Moody, British Columbia for twenty years has birthed dance and poetry, which explores these connections between human and humus. The earth, sea, eagle, and heron lessons continue to shape and inform my inquiry, and in turn shape others, as I share the performative aspects, including writing and performance. Here the visible and

invisible become partners and the wind, and life energy transmuted through the blood is invisible, and I am moved to bring forth form. I am recreated in soil and sky, salt and rain, and I offer my own work to others. However, unless I fully give myself to the practice of walking and listening – the food for the artist and researcher, I have nothing to give. Creation gives to me in its infinite abundance, and I come to its feet as a place of libation, offering my own life. Here I am given the lessons of what it means to journey in this field in the years ahead. To walk humbly, and in humanity, knowing the weight, yet giving way to levity. Humor, human and humility become the blood of dancing from the personal to the universal.

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### About the Author

Celeste Snowber, PhD, is a dancer, poet, and educator who is an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University outside Vancouver, B.C. Canada. She has written extensively in the area of arts and embodiment and is author of *Embodied Prayer* and has co-written *Landscapes of Aesthetic Education*. Her poetry has also been published in a variety of journals and she is presently working on several full-length collections. A passionate mentor of graduate students, she focuses her work in the area of embodied ways of inquiry and arts-based research. Celeste continues to create site-specific performances in the natural world, which include dance and poetry in sites near the ocean and is has created a performed on a full length show entitled, “Woman Giving Birth to a Red Pepper.” Her website can be found at [www.celestesnowber.com](http://www.celestesnowber.com) and her bodypsalm blog can be found at [www.bodypsalms.com](http://www.bodypsalms.com).

# International Journal of Education & the Arts

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## **The N of 1 in Arts-Based Research: Reliability and Validity**

Richard Siegesmund  
Northern Illinois University, USA

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### **Abstract**

N signifies the number of data samples in a study. Traditional research values numerous data samples as this reduces the variability created by extremes. Alternatively, arts-based research privileges the outlier, the N of 1. Oftentimes, what is unique and outside the norm is the focus. There are three approaches to the N of 1 in arts-based research: imaginative forming, teacher research of becoming, and perpetual provoking. These three outlier views of arts-based research conflict with each other, yet Graeme Sullivan's (2010) Framework for Visual Arts Research easily accommodates all three. Furthermore, these approaches are not static. Criteria for assessing the quality of arts-based educational research lie in how imaginatively and dynamically the work moves within Sullivan's Framework. Ultimately, to consider a work of arts-based research as educational, it must engage pragmatic concerns of teaching and classrooms.



### **The N of 1 in Arts-Based Research: Reliability and Validity**

The representation of N in quantitative research relates to the statistical concept of reliability. N signifies the number of data samples in a study. Numerous data samples begin to create cluster patterns that reduce the variability created by extremes. Patterns suggest pathways. For example, on a matrix tracing the interactions of independent and dependent variables, only through numerous samples can a line of regression (a pathway) emerge that allows a researcher to report the effects of a treatment in such a way that we may have trust in a prediction of future outcomes. The pathway (the line of regression) points to our future expectations. Outliers from this line are anomalies. In fact, it is acceptable practice in quantitative research to judiciously discard outliers that may muddy our focus.

In education, it is common to think that an N that stands alone is an outlier that skews our overall view of the data. For example, when calculating scores from student evaluations, it is generally acceptable to discard the high score and low score, as the inclusion of outliers may invite Simpson's Paradox where a rogue N wildly outweighs a mean score and provokes movement in a direction opposite to the median. In this paradigm, outliers distort. They mask our ability to act most judiciously for the public good. Such a concept of research sees the public good as addressed by the quantity of people who cluster around the average. This is validity. Thus in education, we commonly judge outliers as falling outside of our concern to serve the public good as they lie too far afield.

Today, we see the international consequences of this paradigm as realized through holding schools accountable to reliable standardized performance tests. Schools that do not meet the pre-set benchmarks concentrate educational resources on those students clustered just below the cut mark, as these students hold the greatest hope that a slight improvement will push them over the established standard. Students just above the cut mark also receive considerable attention in order that they hold their precarious position. Students well above the cut mark—one type of outlier—can fend for themselves. Those students furthest below the mark—another but more troublesome outlier—receive minimal resources, as these students are too far beyond hope. Beyond hope, at least, as long as the public good is associated with reliably average scores. Thus, our belief in the concept of N as directing us to a vision of the public good, allows us to dismiss some elements of the public as beyond our best efforts.

In contrast, arts-based research privileges the outlier. Oftentimes, what is unique, what lies outside any concept of norm is the focus. Validity in arts-based research begins with considering the overlooked case. However, different forms of arts-based research work with an N of 1 in different ways; therefore, there is a need for constantly qualifying what kind of arts-based research one is using as this can change conceptions of arts-based validity and reliability.

Arts-based research contains three approaches to the N of 1: 1) The N of 1 as imaginative forming; 2) The N of 1 as a teacher research of becoming; and 3) The N of 1 as perpetual provoking. These approaches are modest additions to Sullivan's larger conceptual *Framework of Visual Arts Research* (2010, p. 102). These three arts-based research approaches have their own conceptual frameworks—which can be at odds with each other. Nevertheless, all three fall within a realm of arts-based research. However, I adhere to Eisner's (2008) qualification that arts-based *educational* research is its own sub-category within arts-based research. Therefore, it is important to note that there can be forms of arts-based research that are not arts-based educational research. Furthermore, all arts-based research conducted by educators is not inherently arts-based educational research. It would be helpful to the field of arts-based research and arts-based educational research if researchers clearly declared more fine-grained distinctions in the methodological framework and research objectives of their work.

### **Three Roles of Outliers**

#### ***The N of 1 as Imaginative Forming***

The arts, parallel to the rise of statistical, managerial thinking, have presented an alternative vision of how to look at the public good. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the artistic movement of modernism has focused on bringing all aspects of society into critical examination. This tradition has challenged artists to look at the insignificant or irrelevant aspects of society and reshape them in such a way that they demand our attention and consideration.

In one view of arts-based research, the outlier is a challenge to our imagination. It forces our imagination to grow. This might be seen as a German Idealist function of art, the challenge to try to bring into a conceptual field that which is currently beyond our mental visualization and comprehension, in the hope that something new, something bigger, something more *cohesive* might emerge. In short, ideas gain *form*.

Modern art searches for new understandings of validity: what are the items that belong in our conversation, what are the items that need to hold a place in our consciousness? For example, Picasso's *Guernica* (1937)—a painting of the horrors of the bombing attack on a Basque village on April 26, 1937 during the Spanish Civil War—holds, to this day, our attention as a reflection on the tragedy of war. The painting carries an emotional forcefulness that may be lost in written historical recordings of the event. A work like *Guernica* does not attempt to explain, or synthesize. It bears witness. It is a refusal to remain silent in the hopes that there is public outrage against such atrocities. This arts tradition maintains its importance to the public sphere as an expansion of what we can hold in our imaginations, not by regression to the mean. Arts-based research that follows a modernist tradition engages in acts of uncoverage.

Eisner's arts-based educational research methodology of educational criticism (1998) falls within this modernist conception. This method is rooted in better understanding the life of classrooms and grounded in the concept of teaching as an artistic performance that has form. He offers three criteria for assessing the validity of a research study.

- *Referential adequacy*: Can we find the evidence in the study for ourselves? Does the emperor have clothes? In short, is the claimed evidence more than rhetoric; is it verifiable?
- *Structural corroboration*: Is the inferential reasoning coherent and based on the evidence? Does the author supply sufficient evidence that the interpretation remains compelling even if we can identify counter evidence?
- *Consensual validation*: Finally, while there may be evidence, and the interpretation of evidence may be believable, this interpretation must change the way that a reader sees the world. The reader must testify that such a reading has brought a reconsideration of his or her own practice and action.

Here the assumption is that the educational good is something added. Eisner sites Dewey's claim that the purpose of criticism is the enlargement of perception (1934/1989). Through the arts, we form a larger vision; we hold more in the scope of consideration. Most critically, we act on this more encompassing vision to bring outliers into view and into a conversation. In the end, the educator inclusively fashions an array of ever expanding forms.

### ***The N of 1 as a Teacher Research of Becoming***

Contemporary conceptions of art as individual transformation stem from psychoanalytic traditions tied to expression of emotions and mental health. Victor Lowenfeld's *Creative and Mental Growth* (1947) is an early exemplar. Contemporary practice includes the works of Shaun McNiff (1998). While this too is a view of forming a whole—and thus fundamentally modernist in its orientation—it also plays off of other traditions such as Jacques Lacan (2002) and forms of semiotic self-narrative as represented by Mikhail Bakhtin (1981).

Central to the shift is an emphasis on the verb *becoming* from the noun of *form*. The arts-based research methodology of a/r/tography that focuses on becoming provides this contrast with educational criticism that emphasizes the finding of form (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo & Gouzouasis, 2008).

Dewey (1934/1987) suggests that a criterion for a work of art is its ability to reorganize space and time. This requires a shattering of recognition and in its place a rebuilding of perception. A/r/tography focuses on individual Deweyian rebuilding with a keen eye to Dewey's insistence that this is always a formative work in progress. There is no reliable summative end

product. Works in process veer, back-step, and change course. They have *flexible purposing* (Dewey, 1938). This process does not end in rest and reassurance. The disrupting of the narrative of our past throws us out of balance, and we adapt. If we are in balance, then this artificial state lacks validity. We go back and disrupt ourselves again. A/r/tography does not have criteria for engagement, but renderings. These include:

- *Contiguity*: That which lies adjacent but juxtaposed, and unresolved.
- *Living Inquiry*: Change is continuous and we live in ever-changing organic cultures that never establish into the comfort of best practice.
- *Metaphor and Metonymy*: We make meaning by bricolaging that which is familiar to us into new understanding.
- *Openings*: Experiential tears and ruptures force the imagination into new constructions.
- *Reverberations*: Forces that cause disequilibrium and require the research to shift.
- *Excess*: Pushing past form, not simplify to achieve clarity, but to more willfully trouble and make messy in order to unsettle the comfort of understanding.

These are renderings of transformation and becoming that seek to re-orient, re-establish, the researchers own metacognitive awareness of self-presence in teaching: how one's own presence shapes and is continually shaped by the live interaction with those whom we educate and care for.

At the heart of a/r/tography is a Foucaultian sense of the care of self (Foucault, 1988). Only in a coming to care for who we are, in a reflexively disciplined authentic manner that includes linguistic, non-linguistic, and somatic performative actions, can a teacher aspire to engage a common good. It is a highly individualized methodology, but a process of transformation that aspires to allow us to open more fully to those with whom we engage—and perhaps teach.

### ***The N of 1 as Perpetual Provoking***

What if the outlier is not to be normed—not to be synthesized—but remains an unresolved challenge to re-thinking and an impossibility? Rancière (2009) reminds us that aesthetics is the ability to think contradiction. In this conception, the outlier does not force a synthesis of broader understanding, but creates an incessant dissonance that never assimilates and refuses to go away.

In this case, a radical outlier does more than skew; it erases the norm. Here the task of arts-based research is not to make the vision of understanding more robust, more inclusive, or more complex, but instead to subvert this system of understanding for no-other reason than to provoke, to prevent conclusion, or to unsettle any capacity to act. It may even be a willful

occlusion. By shutting out, there is a possibility that a new form of conceptualization will fill the subsequent void.

Here, we begin to see that Ns of 1 in arts-based research may be anti-ethical to each other, with fundamentally different conceptions of the public good, running a spectrum of good as an additive doing, to good as an extraordinary attempt at rendering and not doing.

Contemporary art practice provides numerous examples of the art and research as not-doing. Consider Robert Rauschenberg's (1953) erasure of a drawing by Wilhelm de Kooning, now in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. This work is literally the remnants of Rauschenberg's total erasure (done after de Kooning's consent) of an original drawing by de Kooning. Rauschenberg removed the sacred mark of the artist; he sucked the life out of de Kooning's form and made it unseeable. A work of art is not always a rendering into sight, but can also be a removal—as much a troubling of what might be seen as an assertion of what to see.

Thus, when Dewey says that criticism is the enlargement of perception, there is also the ironic possibility that an enlargement of perception is to actually see less. To learn how to see means that the world that we confidently hold in view dissipates and disappears. This may happen without a promise of a replacement. The work of art is the erasure; it does not predict what comes next.

This third path of the N of 1 relies heavily on French post-modern theory. The arts-based research outlier remains a joker, a provocateur, and an untamed experience that is never expected to result in assimilation. Its role is to perpetually disrupt, trouble, and remain renegade.

In their recent book on arts-based research Jan Jagodzinski and Jason Wallin (2013) eschew the concept of criteria for judging form and the concept of renderings for assessing becomings (as becomings suggest a journey to form). Instead, they offer seven provocations:

1) *Trouble the rhizome*: Rhizomes are simulacra, i.e. perfect copies. Therefore, the metaphor, as presented by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), does not assure change.

2) *Mutate*: By attacking previous form, art metamorphoses. A mutation maintains family resemblances but is initially horrific.

3) *Do nothing*. The becoming of a/r/tography is a doing. The forming of imagination is a doing. However, here art is a form of stopping to do, and assumes that in a void, something else will fill the space.

4) *Steal and cheat*: Art is in constant struggle with neo-liberalism to absorb and

commercialize creative production. Therefore, stealing back from neo-liberal commercialism can make art.

5: *Becoming inhuman*: Deleuze and Guattari (1987) speak to becoming animal and the conscious of the swarm as an alternative to linear rational thinking.

6: *Lose face*: Rather than construct identity, deconstruct it. This does not mean the creation of alternative selves (such as in a Second Life curriculum where students participate through avatars), but an active engagement with undoing: a stripping back of veneers, a radical questioning of one's own subjectivity.

7: *To Betray Well*: The relentless tearing down of form are acts to live perpetually outside of form, and there perhaps is the promise of an authentic individuality.

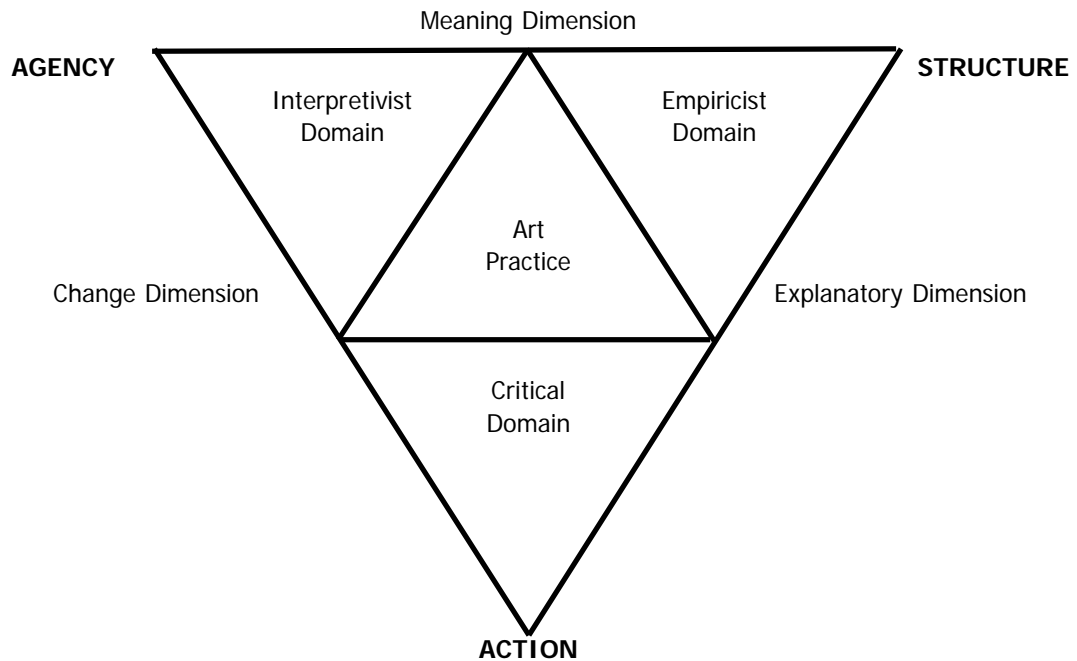
These seven provocations provide criteria for an arts-based democratic social practice. Here reliability (again often based on an N of 1) and validity are assessed in forms of un-doing: in acts of deconstruction. This is the full opposite of holding a larger vision together; these are acts of subterfuge, sabotage, and anarchism. In relentless acts of tearing, the ungainly, the unimaginable and thus the terrifying, emerge into our consciousness. The outlier does not enlarge the norm as much as the norm acknowledges an open fissure that cannot heal. That outlier is evidence of a perpetual wound: a perpetual irritant that remains unabsorbed.

This approach to art research is not necessarily limited to works that we would now refer to as post-modern. Igor Stravinsky (1963) claimed that Beethoven's *Grand Fugue* for string quartet was a work that was absolutely contemporary when composed in 1825, and through its continuing refusal to submit to formal musical analysis "will be contemporary forever" (p. 24). In short, it remains an open wound, never to fully heal, or achieve closure and categorization. It betrays the classical form, prefigures 12-tone music, but remains its own thoroughly unique mutation.

### ***The Irreconcilability of Arts-Based Research***

These three outlier views of arts-based research conflict with each other. For example, an inclusive, imaginative expansion runs counter to a concept of insistent minoritarian estrangement (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987). These views differ and perhaps remain irreconcilable (although Dewey seems to effortlessly transverse all three). However, they are all strategies for art making and art appreciation. Nevertheless, how well do these models overlay on the purposes and goals of educational research?

I continue to find Graeme Sullivan's Framework for Visual Arts Research (2010, p. 102) a useful mapping of the terrain of visual arts research defined as a tension between three factors: Personal Agency, Social Action, and Empirical Structure (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Framework for Visual Arts Research with Dimensions of Practice*

These poles create dimensions of practice: Meaning, Explanation, and personal and social Change. As one moves towards each pole, distinctive domains of practice emerge: the Interpretivist, the Empiricist, and the Critical.

Using Sullivan's schematic, it is possible to place the three outlier approaches to arts-based research that I have discussed: 1) imaginative forming, as represented in the work of Elliot Eisner; 2) research of personal becoming as represented by the theory of a/r/tography) and 3) perpetual provocation as represented by jan jagodzinski and Jason Wallin (Figure 2).

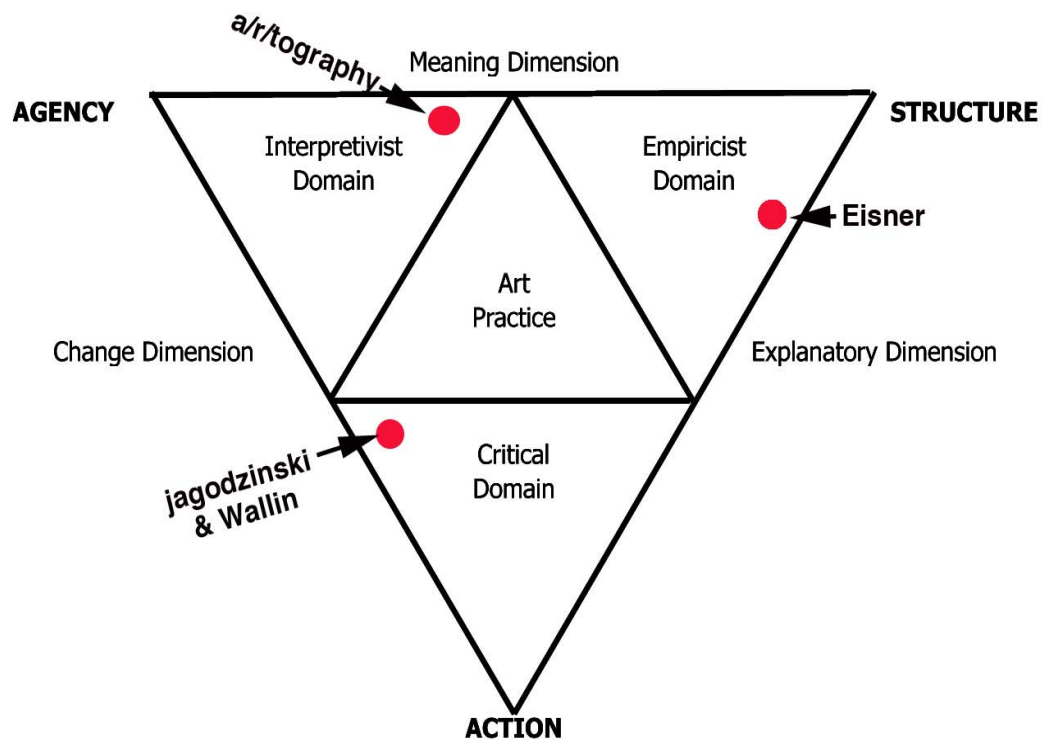


Figure 2. Sullivan's Framework with Arts-Based Research Methodologies

### The Pragmatic Concerns of Education

All three of these outlier responses are easily accommodated within Sullivan's framework as arts-based research. However, I return to Eisner's concern that at the end of the day, educational research, of any kind, must help us shape the pragmatic concerns of how we educate both inside schools as well as in the non-school hours (understanding that pragmatic concerns are how we grow into a more inclusive, socially just future). To use Sullivan's model, education is fundamentally an explanatory process. This is what the teacher controls. While meaning and change may be the outcomes we seek in education, these are not what a teacher can do, but come through student response. A teacher places action in motion in the hopes that students construct meaning and engage in change. Thus, the pragmatic concerns of education most readily fall along what Sullivan calls the Explanatory Dimension.

Arts-based *educational* research specifically addresses the lifeworlds of classrooms as an arena of things ignored, things obscured, and things suppressed. Arts-based educational research challenges our systems to attend to these other realms of consideration. The arts help us to perceive what we have overlooked. Before reliability, arts-based educational research seeks validity—to bring new items of importance into view. In particular, so that others might



see similar concerns and take pragmatic action. If others see the concerns of this N of 1 as well, reliability emerges.

Therefore, a criterion for validity in arts-based educational research is whether it expands our consciousness of what matters in teaching and learning. Such a leap is not meant to emphasize the N of 1 but is designed to bring the outlier in to a larger realm of understanding.

However, a problem with Figure 2 is that works of arts-based educational research are not static. Good work traverses domains. I would suggest that the degree to which a work cuts across Sullivan's framework is a second criterion for evaluating excellence in a work of arts-based educational inquiry. A particular issue is how the work moves in relation to the Explanatory Dimension. The research need not start there. It need not end there. However, somewhere along the journey, the Explanatory Dimension needs to be reckoned with.

John Dewey (1934/1987) suggested that quality in this case could be assessed by the ability of the research to reorganize space and time. The work needs to be more than a testimonial that the researcher's sense of space and time is transformed; the researcher's journey must transform the reader. How then might we begin to construct criteria for the quality of the journey? Martin Heidegger (1971) suggests a journey is "a throw." Throws are plunges; throws take risks. Arts-based research should dare, it should be willing to swerve off course, and seek startling juxtapositions. That which we might have thought was tangential or insignificant should be brought into consideration. A throw itself is motion. It requires movement from one point to another. A throw itself is often a border crosser. However, throws must appear to be authentic and not contrived. An authentic throw is something that we have not seen before. It is not of a kind or belonging to a class; it is an N of 1.

So, even though a work might weigh itself toward a domain of Interpretivist, Empiricist, or Critical, it should not remain statically within that domain. It should move, and the quality of that movement is a means for assessing reliability and validity of the work. All good works of arts-based research should be border crossers that slip boundaries. Works of arts-based educational research steer somehow in relation to the demands of education.

If we sail into other domains of arts-based research—venturing far afield to the Explanatory Dimension—arts-based *educational* research has an obligation to demonstrate how this research journey may come home to a pragmatic footing in the Explanatory Dimension. This task becomes a third criterion of a work of arts-based educational research: does it illuminate how we will *act*, as an educator, *tomorrow*? The research has to be more than a compelling tale of the researcher's personal transformation. The research needs to be more than a provocation. The work has to deconstruct and then offer a direction for the reconstruction of

the perception of the reader, in an educationally significant way. At a minimum, a work of arts-based educational research needs to suggest a method for working the ruins of deconstruction that will lead to a new perception of practice and policy.

Why should that pragmatic concern be something for arts-based educational research to bear, when it is not a concern for arts-based research? First, there is a pragmatic concern for university education professors who supervise works of arts-based research. If works of arts-based research fail to show clear connections to how practitioners can use this research to improve practice, will these researchers—our graduate students—have difficulty in securing positions in higher education? I am concerned that the majority of higher education positions—even those in research universities—will not be interested in a scholar whose work only resonates with an N of 1. University search committees will want to know how the candidate's research relates to the students at their institution and to the communities that the university or college serves. Therefore, a university supervisor of an arts-based research dissertation must give serious consideration to the harm that a graduate student may be doing to him or herself if the N of 1 does not open itself into larger dialogues in which other people find relevance to educational issues.

Education is profoundly pragmatic. A child stands before us on Monday morning. As a teacher, we are responsible for doing something. We must make a mark; we are expected to form a curriculum in which this child will participate. Thus, arts-based educational research holds an inherent tension. It is a methodology of dissensus (Rancière, 2010), and any attempt to homogenize or to standardize to a mean is intrinsically troubling. Therefore, arts-based educational research methodologies inherently works against texts and how-to-complete-your-dissertation self-help books. These methodologies do not easily allow the practitioner to know what steps to follow as arts-based methodologies propel practitioners into thinking contradiction. This is a risk for both supervisors and students who choose to select this methodological path. How in an academic program that is designed to produce researchers for the academic system—where graduate students will need to secure approval from anonymous professionals in the discipline for publication and tenure—would you knowingly allow a student to potentially pursue research that could ultimately leave the student as an outlier, an N of 1?

Therefore, real concerns arise about allowing novice researchers to train in arts-based methods. We risk romanticizing and over simplifying outcomes, instead of forthrightly standing in complexity that being an authentic outlier demands. We should heed with great caution the admonition that art, and therefore arts-based educational research is fundamentally useless: to force a utility on art, to expect art to do certain things, is to undermine authenticity. For example, how does authentic arts-based research conform to the demands of

a dissertation prospectus when an authentic artistic throw is a radical departure from academic process? A prospectus is an exercise in showing an advisory committee that the candidate knows what she or he is doing. A throw is a risk of not knowing. These are treacherous waters; we should be cautious at allowing aspiring academics to rush into them. I fear that too many doctoral students, particularly in arts education, are attracted to arts-based research methods, as they seem familiar; these new scholars do not yet grasp the difficulty of the method.

In all of these cases, the N of 1 is a provocateur. When introducing our students to research, with the expectations for validity and reliability inherent in academic practice, we should acknowledge that arts-based educational research is a mercurial form of engagement. We should urge our students to approach it with caution.

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### **About the Author**

Richard Siegesmund is Professor and Head of Art+Design Education at Northern Illinois University's School of Art and Design. He has received individual fellowship awards from the Getty Education Institute for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Arts, as well as being a Fulbright Scholar. He serves as a Visiting Fellow to the Research Institute of the National College of Art and Design, Dublin, Ireland. A recipient of the Manual Barkan Award for research from the National Art Education Association, he is also an elected Foundation Fellow of the organization. He is a member of the Council for Policy Studies in Art Education. With Melissa Cahnmann-Taylor, he co-edited *Arts-Based Research in Education: Foundations for Practice*. Recent publications include "Dewey Through A/r/tography," published in *Visual Arts Research Journal* and "The Visual Space of Literacy in Art Education" with Karinna Riddett-Moore, in *Literacy across the curriculum: Dilemmas and solutions, Grades 6-12* published by Corwin.

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## **What Does it Mean to Have an N of 1? Art Making, Education, Research, and the Public Good**

Graeme Sullivan  
The Pennsylvania State University, USA

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### **Beyond Elusive Notions of Art and Impoverished Conceptions of Education**

My response to the question posed requires a brief sweep across some historical landscapes to position enduring notions of human knowing that I would argue are in danger of becoming reified and worshipped as neo-mythologies that bear little resemblance to the multiplicity of realities evident today. The goal is to identify issues of the public good by drawing attention to connections and dislocations among art practice, education and research as forms of human engagement, provocation and insight. The paper is organized around a series of propositions and descriptions that have as their subtext a claim that the practices of art can be conceptualized as research. Given this, if ‘art practice as research’ has the potential to generate new knowledge that expands the landscape of human understanding, then the answer to the question posed by the panel about the validity of an ‘N of 1’ is an unequivocal ‘yes’ and that such an instance can be very meaningful indeed.

Proposition 1. *Along with all forms of inquiry, research and art practice share a long tradition, as does the practice of teasing out educational implications.*

A primary mode of investigation is ‘looking’: we look to see what causes things to happen. By developing instruments and strategies that intervene in nature methods of seeing were made more purposeful and goal directed. The eventual adoption by the West of the crucial idea of ‘zero’ meant that observations could be ordered along a continuum, with intervals clearly marked, and categories defined according to shared properties. Quantification meant that things could be organized by degrees of difference and this established measures of confidence among those involved in the new enthusiasm for coming to understand the world as it was seen.

However, a crucial realization emerged, as it was understood that no matter how accurate a measurement, there was always an element of error to contend with. This ushered ‘doubt’ and ‘skepticism’ into the picture and what emerged was a way of thinking that could put logic and rationality to the test. But as a system of ‘knowing’ the method was counter intuitive—the task was not to try to measure what ‘was there’—rather it was easier to see what ‘was *not* there.’ Manipulating an action or intervening into a situation in order to see what happens so as to note some observable change was difficult. Seeing ‘nothing,’ however, is always easier than seeing ‘something.’ Bringing zero into the equation helped because everyone understood what zero meant—nothing, zilch, absence, null: nothing happens. Thus the experimental strategy was to focus on a zero outcome. Consequently, if as a result of manipulating an action or intervening into a situation something was found not to be zero, but something different, then things got interesting. If there was due diligence in controlling all the confounding factors that might be implicated in any intervention, and if the effect achieved meant that it could not be accepted that nothing happened, then it could be argued with a measure of confidence that the change observed was a result of the controlled intervention.

If it could not be accepted that there was zero impact, then the task was to determine if the change was caused by what was done, or whether it was just a matter of chance. Just as any measurement creates an element of error, any controlled intervention that results in a changed state might also be caused by chance. The knowledge that things were distributed naturally in the world and this pattern was dispersed in a regular, quantifiable way, made it relatively easy to see if individual instances could be placed within this predicted pattern, or whether they occurred outside the parameters. Those instances that were observed to be outside the predicted levels of inclusion could not be ‘controlled’ and hence were a product of chance.

What came into reach was a very efficient method of consistently putting ideas about proposed effects and relationships to the test. If conditions of causality could be confirmed then we could make predictions about the probability of similar things happening in the future. And there was comfort in knowing that others could follow the steps taken and in all likelihood achieve the same results.

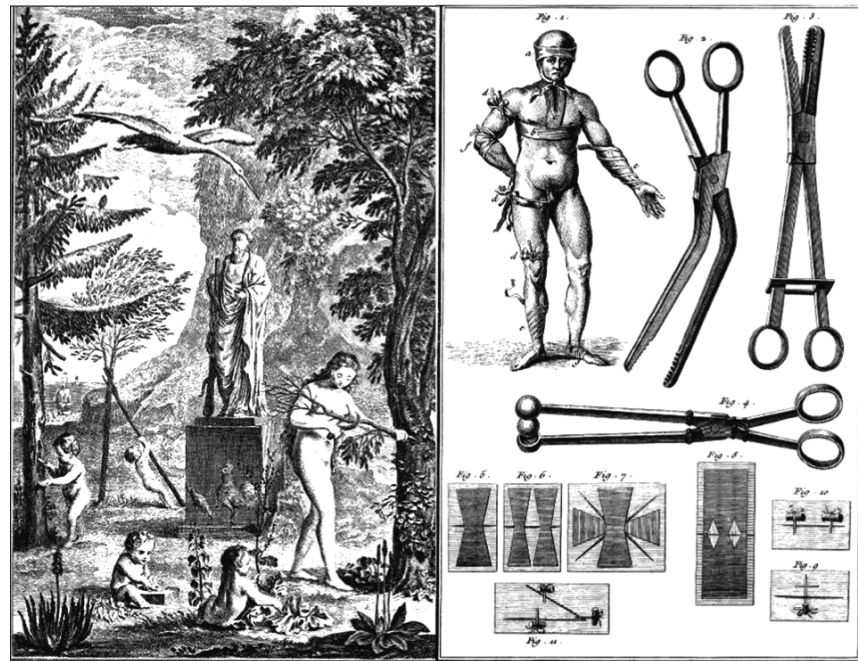


Figure 1. Denis Diderot (1713 – 1784) and Jean La Rond d’Alembert. Entries from Encyclopédie, or a Systematic Dictionary of Science, Arts and the Trades. Surgery (Chirurgie). Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York.

As long as phenomena could be broken down into constituent parts, and these components could be defined explicitly and the elements positioned on a grid, a continuum, a matrix, or any other metric, potential effects and relationships could be investigated. When phenomena were subject to study under controlled conditions using precise instruments it was possible to identify relational and causal connections of change, which made it feasible to measure the difference, to measure the cause of the probable change.

*Proposition 2. If knowledge was assumed to be ‘found out there’ then the means were available to access it and this opened up the possibility and probability of how to explain how things happened. Furthermore the underlying rationality of the procedure was an ideal match for the emerging modern way of looking at things.*

As a result of enlightened thinking, ‘theology became philosophy’ as logical explanations were sought to help understand the new empirical world coming into view. Let me give an example. An influential text in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that later crossed the Atlantic as American thought grappled with philosophical and moral dilemmas in the wake of industrialization and provocative ideas such as Darwin’s explanations of the origin of how we got here, was William Paley’s text, *Paley’s Moral and Political Philosophy* (1838). Initially

published late in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Paley's views garnered considerable public popularity, mostly because he gave a logical explanation of an ordered world; but it was a created world. Paley was a clergyman and a brilliant mathematician who used analogy, rationality and evidence to frame his arguments. When he published *Natural Theology* early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it became a companion piece to his philosophy text, and the full title proclaimed his argument: *Natural Theology, or Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature* (1809).

Paley presented theology as philosophy. Of interest was the way philosophy was defined as a science based on logical reasoning, yet the principles of ethical human behavior were based on religious doctrines, and these were seamlessly integrated. An example of Paley's influence can be seen by the way his arguments became the basis for political justification and integrated into the laws of the land as systems to guide moral and political action.

As an Australian by birth I found the following example especially intriguing because it explained how the British were able to claim moral authority in justifying the colonization of the continent of Australia because it was 'empty' of inhabitants when 'discovered' in 1788. Paley explains why in the 1838 edition of his moral and political philosophy text, which I came across in an attic in a farmhouse in upper New York State several years ago. Paley was writing during the time of relentless colonial expansion and the inexorable possession of land. He argued that if there was no documentation showing ownership of "real estate" then those lands could be freely acquired. Tracts of land were subsequently deemed to be owned by no one and the concept of "Terra Nullius" was invoked—meaning no one lived there. According to Paley, "there were no traces of property in land ... amongst the savages of America or of Australia" (1838, p. 71).

In a similar way that 'theology became philosophy,' *mythology became typology*. Reality as explained by myth was soon replaced by explanations that matched our observations. It seemed that the earth wasn't the center of the universe after all. If Copernicus had been a traveller and has seen the paintings of Piero della Francesca painted about a century earlier he would have observed that the shadow formed by a sphere is an ellipse, not a circle. And perhaps he would have found support for his view that the sun was the center of the universe because when the planets circle the sun, for they don't orbit along a circular path, but one that is elliptical. Even so, a legacy of this iterative approach to compiling insights that are confirmed empirically by experience and evidence, no matter where they originate, is that new information eventually becomes part of the structures used to organize accepted knowledge.



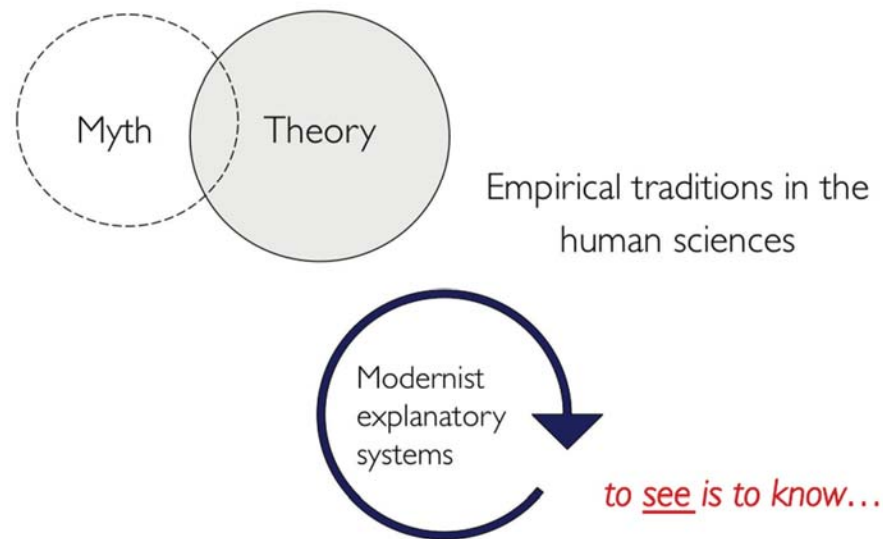


Figure 2. Move to Modernist Explanations: *to see is to know*

The typologies of knowledge created from the explosion of information during modern times grew exponentially. Conceptual structures were defined that ordered information into categories, classes, hierarchies and sequences so that all related elements could be partitioned into fields of discipline knowledge. From these fields, knowledge workers constructed communities that grew into academies and schools used to house discipline-based content and to propagate it through the industry of education. “To see is to know” was the modernist mantra – if something was observed and verified by others, it must be real and true. The new digital paradigm of information technology is repeating this process of knowledge propagation, however the disciplines that emerged in modern times have been unable to contain the sprawling landscape of knowledge now evolving. Over time, the intense pursuit to quantify worldly observations and explanations by measuring them often got it wrong.

Proposition 3. *The quest to find what causes things to happen gave rise to a brilliant methodology that put everything in doubt and then sought evidence to measure the likelihood that what we saw was not a random or chance occurrence, but the outcome of some purposeful action. But it was difficult to freeze frame the complexity of everyday reality. Finding and solving problems was not merely a linear process. As Gloria Steinem<sup>1</sup> said, “you don’t solve problems you surround them.”*

<sup>1</sup> Comment made in an interview on NPR Radio in the early 1990s.

Linear systems of logic are based on the probability of a proportional relationship between cause and effect. Furthermore, this relationship can be measured if operational definitions clearly prescribe how concepts are translated into degrees of difference. Non-linear systems on the other hand involve complex interactive forms, differential influences, and changing relationships. In order to capture the complexity of these dynamic, interactive systems a methodology that is inclusive of the relevant perspectives is required. This, in essence, is what is meant by the quip that one doesn't "solve problems, you surround them." The outcome is a synthesis that brings new understandings and coherence to otherwise complex phenomena. The plausibility of the outcome is determined by intersubjective agreement that arises from strategies such as an independent auditing of interpretive decisions, which provides a warrant to endorse the trustworthiness of the accrued evidence.

*Proposition 4. When problems are perceived one looks at them from all angles. As with the sense of doubt that fuels scientific inquiry, a prominent research practice in the arts is to ask the critical question, 'what is not there?' To take a critical perspective is to get inside a problem, to get inside an idea, in order to understand it. Dichotomies such as insider-outsider, objective-subjective, form-content, have operational utility but reduce everything to Euclidean world – a measured world of assumed order. But life is much more interesting than that.*

Support for this proposition is best presented through an example. Moving in the interpretive space that lies between concepts that resist prescriptive meaning and measured realities can often be understood through experience as much as it is revealed through the assumed authority of others, or definitional conventions. An example is shown in Figure 3, which is a section of an installation titled, *The Labyrinth*, by Angiola Churchill. In this piece, attention is drawn to form, structure and measurement, yet the precision opens up a perceptual space where the outside is also the inside, and an objective encounter is also a subjective experience.

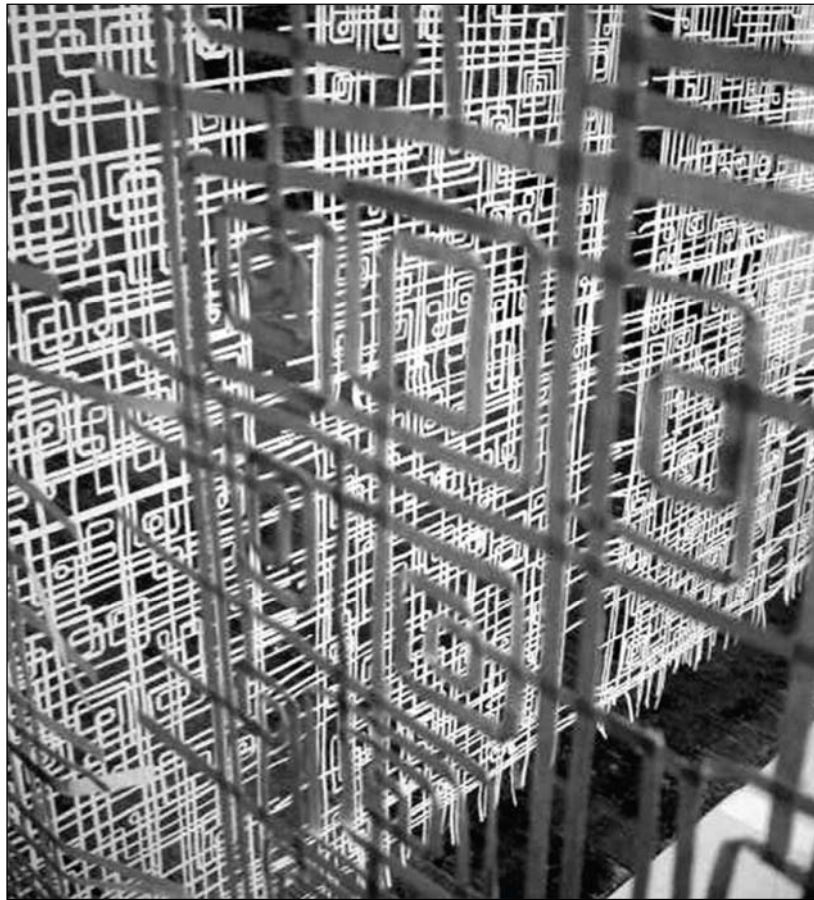


Figure 3. Angiola Churchill. *The Labyrinth*. 2003. Paper. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Proposition 5: *Subjective experience is a powerful form of human knowing. It frames our very being. The knowledge we bring to encounters with art and life is crucial for re-imagining what might be.*

Many sources have been attributed to the quip “there is no such thing as immaculate perception.” Permit me to provide a visual example (see Figure 4). In this image, I was visiting a museum on a particularly chilly day. So I stopped by a second hand clothing store and bought a football jumper. Little did I know at the time that one of the displays was an exhibition of large paintings by the Irish-born American painter, Sean Scully. As the image indicates, I ‘became’ a Sean Scully painting. Part of this process of accommodation was formed by my prior knowledge of Scully’s work, which was not only contained within the cognitive scripts of knowledge and awareness carried around in my head, but in this case my ‘apriori’ knowledge was also an emblem I ‘wore’ in public. I certainly was informed by this exhibition, the work itself, and the essays prepared by the curators and historians. But it was all filtered through the interpretive systems that are part of who I am. Interpretive structures of

knowledge construction don't generalize like quantitative methods where there is some probable relationship between the sample and the population. If outcomes from quantitative studies that use representative samples are significant, then we can infer from the 'specific to the general.' In qualitative studies, it is the experiential connections made among particularities and contexts that are important—in these cases the extrapolation of information involves finding deep connections between the 'specific and the specific.' We learn from others by finding connections to experiences that expand our situated knowledge in ways that help us think about our behavior, and this helps us deal with how our behavior might change.

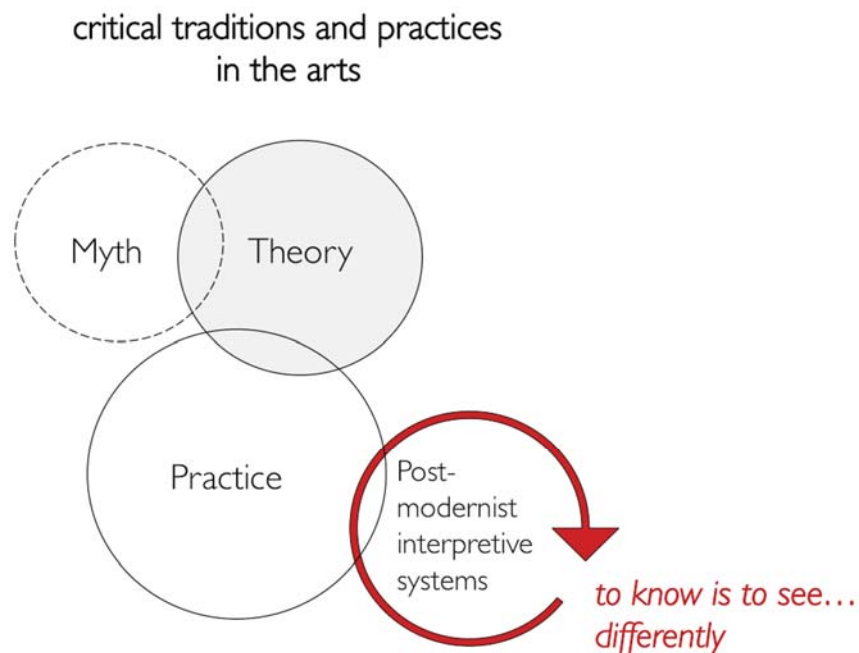


*Figure 4. Becoming Sean Scully. Photograph courtesy of Mary Sullivan.*

*Proposition 6: The visual invention of modernism was radically altered by the critical and creative practices of postmodernism. New tools for thinking emerged, along with new ways of conceptualizing systems of human engagement and this provided the impetus theorizing how 'studio thinking' could be conceived as research practice.*

The empirical dictum, 'to see is to know' mentioned earlier, was replaced by an understanding of how visual culture operates. The analysis of systems of artistic production, its reception, and uses in communication, became more clearly understood as an embedded cultural practice. Gillian Rose (2001) captured this mode of cultural theorizing by flipping the modernist empirical adage, "to see is to know," to proclaim "to know is to see." When systems of cultural critique are related to the complex realities faced today, the interpretive

process invoked suggests, “to know is to see ... *differently*.” The probability of our quantitative world and the plausibility of our qualitative experience were expanded to consider the possibility of new perspectives. If one knew what was behind what was seen, then one could ‘see through it.’ Knowledge about how cultural, political, institutional, technological, and economic systems operate in our postmodern world means that one doesn’t get easily fooled by inherent bias, misinformation, half-truth or spin. The capacity to look inside at what is projected on the outside, as well as to look for what is not there, is a critical approach that has a long history within artistic inquiry. Similarly, the creative process of looking forward to what’s possible is often done unencumbered by the safety net of prior knowledge, yet looking backwards at cultural production of the present and past remains a contextual frame of reference that contributes to the assessment of meaning and significance.



*Figure 5. Move to Postmodern Explanations: To know is to see... differently.*

*Proposition 7. When the arts utilize research practices such as data collection, analysis and interpretation, it is often not only to describe the parts, search through disaggregated bits of information, but also to understand relational and contextual factors.*

Part of the realization of the efficacy of the research process, whether working within a quantitative or qualitative domain, is to accept that for data to be transformed into useful information one has to understand that data are ‘alive.’ Figure 6 is an installation by Rashad Alakbarov that was exhibited in the 2007 Venice Biennale in the Republic of Azerbaijan

pavilion. Alakbarov's installation comprised a flat pedestal pressed into a corner of the gallery. Placed on the pedestal was a collection of everyday domestic objects that we routinely toss away. They were attached in various configurations by clothespins and tape to create an array that had no discernible pattern or structure. It was a collection of form in the raw. Two lamps were placed to the left and right of the pedestal facing the installation. Alternating at regular intervals each lamp would turn on and cast a shadow of the flattened profile of the objects onto each wall. On one side a profile would be cast of the skyline resembling New York City with its vertical horizons of skyscrapers. When the other light came on the shadow of the same forms would become an irregular horizontal landscape of domes and minarets that resembled a city such as Istanbul. Same source—different place; same forms—different meaning; same raw data—different information. It depended on the point of view.

I've had cause to refer to Rashad Alakbarov's installation on many occasions. This is one description: "[Alakbarov] shows with elegant simplicity how an information source when looked at in a different way, can yield a completely different outcome—much like research data that reveals competing interpretations if analyzed using different methods" (Sullivan, 2010, p. 226). Comparing the artist's intent in creating an ambiguous reading to the process of data analysis has particular resonance. In this example we see complex data that occupies real space and time reduced to simple, one-dimensional arrays that can be readily interpreted and compared. However, if raw data are manipulated—in this case by simply looking at it from a different angle— and yield different, yet equally plausible information, then this raises doubt about the explanatory power of a singular interpretation. If the process of shedding light (pun intended) on particular ideas or issues with the hope of better understanding them is central to human curiosity yet can yield such conflicting outcomes, how do the inquiry practices we engage in as artists and art teachers help us make meaning from our encounters within the worlds in which we live?

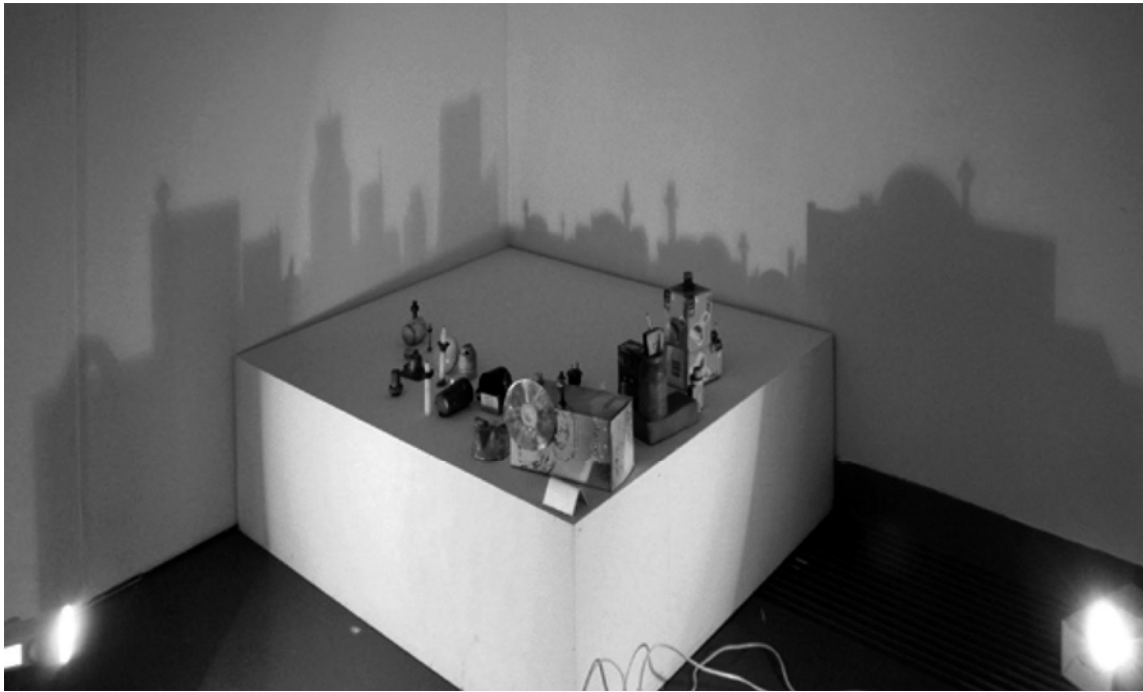


Figure 6. Rashad Alakbarov. *Looking at Two Cities from One Point of View*. 2002. Mixed media installation, light. Dimensions variable. Reproduced courtesy of the artist

### Conclusion

The powerful tradition of scientific research has of course given rise to the equally powerful discourse around ‘evidence-based research’ and the gold standard of the randomized controlled experiment. Over the past two and half decades the tendency has been to blindly adhere to the idea of compiling rich landscapes of robust evidence as the foundation upon which to make educational decisions. The discourse around evidence-based educational research was modeled on the Cochrane Collaboration, which reviews research evidence for the medical field (see: [www.cochrane.org](http://www.cochrane.org) formally set up in UK in early 1990s).

The randomized controlled experiment continues to be used as the model that is assumed to yield the evidence needed for policy makers to make decisions about educational change. Look at the successes. The chemical companies supporting agriculture have been enormously successful in eradicating disease and developing effective ways to prevent problems in farming. Similarly, the pharmaceutical industry has been able to develop blockbuster drugs that contain, prevent, and in some cases cure disease. If there is an illness, then the randomized controlled experiment is your best bet in figuring out how to go about curing that problem. Yet today, the complexity of disease resists the many attempts to find a singular cure that works in all local and global settings. The randomized controlled experiment is only part

of the collaborative research enterprise seen to be necessary to tackle diseases that are marked by their diversity, not by their singular identity.

The uncritical support for evidence-based research is hard to resist. For the past three decades we've been told incessantly that our education system is 'ill.' Give the success of evidence-based research in the drug and chemical industries it seems a good bet to apply the same logic to our ailing schools. However, education is not a problem to be cured; it is a human resource to be cared for. It is evidence of care, not cure that can guide efforts to improve the effectiveness of how we teach and the capacity of how others learn. Furthermore, the kind of evidence needed to shape human agency can be found in the insightful methods used by artistic practitioners.

Around the time of the early research regimes that later became the Cochrane Collaboration in the Britain, another part of the medical industry protested. The health care sector was certainly part of the medical industry, but what drove nurse practitioners was 'care', not 'cure.' A caring environment is one that *surrounds* the main areas of focus. And all sorts of complexities and contexts and a multitude of factors come into play when care is the goal. What the nurse practitioners did was to develop discourse around the idea of 'practice-based evidence.' The evidence they found important emerged from multiple modes of questioning and a raft of methods of inquiry. In many cases it was not merely collecting data and subjecting it to analysis, but in some cases, data needed to be *created* to see where a line of inquiry might lead.

For those who create new knowledge using practices that may be systematic, rigorous, yet different, the discourse circles around arguments about 'practice-based evidence' rather than evidence-based research.' And this is what arts practitioners do. It's what nurse practitioners do. In expanding the methodologies of what research might be by embracing the approaches used by practitioners, all aspects of knowledge construction and creation are open to question. Sometimes we build from the known to the unknown and add missing bits to the jigsaw of accumulated knowledge. At other times creative 're-search' will inhabit unknown spaces that will only make sense when it is seen in relation to a community of critical interpreters. Many of the phenomena studied using scholarly and creative practices can't be captured in an ordered universe. The world is much more complex and interesting.

Cezanne's insight was not that nature was composed of a stable Euclidean structure of cylinders, spheres and cones — his visual intuition was to understand that time, motion and light couldn't be isolated and rendered motionless. His still life paintings are his evidence and they are most certainly not still. Nor is research, nor is education. Nor is an individual. And this is why an N of 1 is real and makes good sense.



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### About the Author

Graeme Sullivan has been messing with art for quite a while in his many roles as teacher, artist, researcher, artwriter, and administrator, and uses creativity, information, persuasion and street-smarts to 'excite others about art.' He is currently the Director of the School of Visual Arts, Pennsylvania State University. Graeme has been researching studio-based practices since the early 1990s, and authored the seminal text, *Art Practice as Research* (2005/10). He continues to publish widely on studio-based research. He has taken on many professional roles he is the present Chair of the NAEA Research Commission. Graeme maintains an active art practice and creates Streetworks from any available material and these are installed in cities and urban spaces. He says, "I'm not sure what happens to most pieces. Even if the life of the artwork is short, or the encounter brief, one never really knows the outcome, nor where the experience of art happens. I like that."

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