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Messy never-endings: Curating *inConversation* as interdisciplinary collaborative dialogue

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Introduction

This paper explores the on-going curation process of a collaboration exhibition amongst creative higher degree by research candidates (from the School of Communications and Arts and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts), arts practitioners and researchers from different art-forms and discipline backgrounds. The exhibition looks at the conversations between artists and research collaborators working together to produce a broad range of creative works, culminating in a collaborative exhibition titled *inConversation*, to be staged at Edith Cowan University's Spectrum Project Space in October 2014. The curation focuses on cross-disciplinary conversations and reflections, which were documented and analysed to gain an understanding of how they shape the practices of individual researchers and the artefacts they create.

The context of the *inConversation* exhibition aims to inform and expand on current debates about the challenges and benefits of inter- and cross-disciplinary collaboration in the arts. While collaboration within discrete artistic disciplines has been quite common, it is now becoming increasingly important for artists to look beyond their silos and invite interactions with researchers in other disciplines and art forms.

Collaboration is a messy and often complex process. The curation of this exhibition explores what complexity may mean in terms of the processes of practice-led research in investigating how the push and pull of the collaborative process, by which the outcomes become more than the sum of the parts, plays out in a cross-disciplinary, creative context.

The journey begins . . .

This exhibition began with a grant. Well in fact, before the grant, it began with a conversation. A conversation about how we might take the weekly forum we have hosted since 2012, *This is not a seminar: creative research dialogues* (TINAS), and manifest the ethos of the forum – of cross disciplinary practice-led research – into an embodied form. This forum emerged from a need to better support creative researchers by encouraging rigour and critical thinking within a safe environment of a shared network of like-minded individuals, 'new research collaborations can succeed

within very department-based universities. The key factor is organisational culture rather than organisational structures' (Taylor, 2013, p. 10). Albeit a little dry, this finding is spot on. We have found that the success of TINAS has been in the listening and enacting of ideas, qualities and feelings felt through the sharing of each-others processes, our beginnings, middle and endings, and of opening up the notion that an ending is also another beginning. Curating *inConversation* is our attempt to embody these qualities in a tangible and material form. The research is focused on processes of collaboration, conversation, reflection and their impacts on evolving arts practices.

We have no doubt that the exhibition has resulted in multiple research impacts and outcomes, however we doubt that any of us (we safely include all participating teams) were prepared for where these interdisciplinary outcomes would take us.

inConversation explores research dialogues between various disciplines bringing together 54 artists and researchers across 14 groups, from ECU with other external local, national and international artists and researchers from far ranging disciplines such as photography, architecture and performance art, visual art and visual arts and music education, music, literature and creative writing, geology, dance, film and, would you believe it, local government in the form of a former mayor. The exhibition generates a space to allow conversations from viewers to take place through these unique dialogues about practice and research.

Participating groups in *inConversation* adopt various approaches to perform, display, and/or represent the conversations. While some conversationalist groups chose to represent their conversations through a dominant discipline, others shared their voices through common grounds. These are outcomes of organic conversations that started with curiosity and ambiguity and set out to explore and negotiate critical thoughts surrounding trans-disciplinary practice and research.

Practice-led research and multi-modality

Practice-led research is concerned with the nature of practice and leads to new knowledge that has significance for that practice. Knowledge is experienced through the work, and it is the various relationships between the explanation of the work and the work itself via an explicit methodology that makes it research (Powles, 2005).

Reflecting the cross-disciplinary connectivity, which is at the heart of *inConversation*, this project has employed a hybrid approach that could be characterised as multi-method led by the practice (Gray, 1996). These 14 groups have come together in a variety of ways to share, learn and create new work from different perspectives and with different materials and life stories. We have tried to capture this meeting place by varying the traditional artist statement for the catalogue so the statements were less about artistic intention or didactic and more about what is gained in engaging in this way and what were the challenges to coming together like this. Thus, these

statements become fascinating statements about collaboration and the challenge of working outside a disciplinary comfort zone. We suggest these statements are really helpful in gaining an understanding on each group and may inform any future analysis of generated data by assisting in the critical reflection on the process of interdisciplinary collaboration which can be at best described as tricky, eye-opening and at times thoroughly exhausting.

The messiness unfolds

This research engages practice-led and other researchers in cross-disciplinary conversations that will potentially foster a myriad of traditional and non-traditional research. Wilkie et al., (2010) among others, describe this coming together as a 'creative assemblage' where the dynamic and rigorous research methodology puts sharing disciplinary specific knowledge at the forefront, referring to this process as 'open' dialogue:

[These dialogues] involved a dynamically shifting cast of contributors ... network members ranging from core project partners to ad hoc participants, and produced outcomes ranging from prototypes on the one hand to community events, press coverage, postgraduate researchers and a research community on the other. Rather than producing a clear transfer of intellectual property for commercial gain, such projects arguably create the conditions in which intellectual property can be developed by a wide variety of people in a broad range of settings. (Wilkie et al., 2010, p. 99)

These collaborative endeavours are now inclusive of curatorial work and have been the philosophy driving the *inConversation* curatorial team. In a contemporary context the *Tranzit* collaborative research group (Szakács, 2012), argue that curatorial work applies to a broader set of conditions beyond the presentation of artworks and the job of making an exhibition. We now acknowledge this work as more conceptual, involving projects that are of a longer gestational time frame, are centred more on practice, knowledge making, research and processes, dialogic by nature, and able to disrupt siloed forms of practice.

The call for proposals went out in August 2013, asking for groups of cross-disciplinary/cross-art form collaborations to be exhibited in October 2014, Spectrum Project Space, Edith Cowan University (ECU). We asked that there was a minimum of three disciplines represented in each group application.

The selection panel was made up of the TINAS Curatorial team, the Manager of Spectrum Project Space, Claire Bushby, and Neil Ferguson, research assistant on the grant. The assessment process was based on: strength of the idea, innovation of both piece and partnership, do-ability within the limitations of *Spectrum Project*

Space, site-specificity and alignment with the ethos of creative interdisciplinary research and supporting material submitted. 14 teams of researchers (including ourselves) were selected after this rigorous process. All applicants that were not successful were given feedback gathered from the selection panel.

InConversation challenges participants and viewers to integrate traditional approaches to gathering, analysing and disseminating data and knowledge that is useful for our different disciplines with the more pluralistic, holistic, hybrid, 'anarchical' creative processes governed by inclusive, non-linear complex systems that characterise practice-led research (Gray and Pirie, 1995). It was thought that we would investigate and extrapolate the conversations between researchers/artists (idea generation) and document the artworks and processes (idea selection) drawing on conventional methods such as participant observation, focus groups and ethnographic interviews but in fact what has been really interesting is hearing the various conversations about conversations along the way and receiving the fascinating articulations of processes by the various group conversations that follow this essay. In exploring the dynamic processes of inter-disciplinary collaborative relationships, we think it is safe to say that we all drew on methods of practice such as: sketching, note-taking, photography, drafting and editing, simulations, self-reflection, reflexivity, bricolage, concept mapping, film making, sound recordings, story boards, and flow charts (which you will note has partly informed the catalogue which is in print and interactive PDF for submission in e-research). Using these creative methods along with perhaps more conventional methods has certainly enabled us to reflect on how we might analyse and articulate our individual practices as carried out in our various discipline/s, and the challenges and benefits of inter-disciplinary/cross collaboration. It's safe to say that we were all immersed in the process and feedback loop, reflection in and on action that is practice-led creative research.

The next phase was creation – in the words of Janette Winterson 'I do not think of art as Consolation. I think of it as Creation...art makes it possible to live in energetic space' (1995, p. 114) – the artefacts take on a unified form even though within a practice-led research paradigm a given work is never static, even beyond the point of apparent realisation. At the point of resolution a process of critical engagement with the edited work is entered – a reflective study that marks one point of conclusion within the work (Adams, 2008, Brown and Sorensen, 2009). This is perhaps the future of how we might look at these collections of works and experiences and hence, the title of the paper; *messy never-endings*. But first, a note on our collaborators.

Coming together

There were 54 participants in fourteen teams.

Penanegra sees the team of researchers encapsulate their conversation surrounding cross-cultural notions of grief and ideas around movement and improvisation through video, drawing, photos and sound recordings while in *Untitled 7*, the disciplines of dance, visual arts and music were maintained quite clearly whilst still engaging in a collision of movement, body, sound and the blending of immiscible pigments to confront notions of resistance and transformation. As the title implies *E/Motion: Digital Acting and Motion Capture* brought a theatre director, a Laban Movement Analyst and an e-researcher together to play with motion capture as a way in which to capture the self in motion — a research based rehearsal strategy — and together found that perhaps the listening, hearing and concessions to each individuals' process is beyond the scope of this project, saying something more or else about how humans behave together. Dance, sculpture, writing and music were the disciplines in action in *Telephone*. They discussed meeting points, the push and pull of egos and artistry and the proximity and distance that comes with acknowledged and unacknowledged solo or collaborative works or in other words the meeting place of spice, flavour, contaminations and concession, oh — and a digital DJ.

Skirmish brings together visual arts, video arts and dance, along with family and friends in collaboration between Perth, WA and Grafton, NSW. Text grabs, hasty phone calls and Skype sessions across the country has brought together a unique sense of exchange in motion, of seconds left and time taken. Similarly *reading* is the outcome of an ill-fated road trip across the Nullarbor. The result is a juncture between a photographer, an architect with a drag performer and a still object, a furniture piece that makes real how we 'read' one another with interpretations and misinterpretations, intermixed and at play.

Dwell sees a convergence of the visual arts as a mixed media 3D artist, a cross media artist and a ceramics maker come together to produce a work encapsulating notions of home, stitching time and place, interiority and the domestic. Drawing from contemporary arts, performance and design, *inbetween* plays with notions of empathy, movement, illumination, and material forms of coming together in conversation. Originally we thought that we had an advantage in this messy business as originators of the idea — this was certainly not the case! Our conversations did however give us insight into the machinations of the other teams false starts and cross-disciplinary dialectic mistranslations (both unintended and wilful).

In the collaboration *Reality*, a visual artist meets CSIRO scientist and hydrologist to talk on fractal grids, near misses, real time and dogs on beaches caught in a momentary splice of time. *Smoke and mirrors* on the other hand seems an apt title for a visual artist and disillusioned academic, a designer and a political scientist to come together in dialogue on the discursive, the enacted, the nature of responsibility and of the nexus between solidarity and alienation in art and politics across

continents and time-zones. While seemingly disparate *Mandurah* also came together to produce an artist's book that is the result of dialogues about space, place, language and the heart in the act of a city-claiming agency. They drew from the diverse disciplines of social work, visual arts, music and creative writing.

Three other artists' books were produced as consequences of team conversations. A scientist, two visual artists, three writers, an ecologist and a cultural theorist came together to dialogue on *((Pollen))* bringing with them unique perspectives from Canada, Sweden, Scotland and Australia. In *On Manning Ridge* a visual artist, writer, geologist and musician came together to walk and talk a familiar patch of land, catching the ecological with language, the notion of deep listening, limestone formations and calcified roots to talk about the notion of coming together as soloists in a vastly interconnected network of systems. A visual artist, an architect and a writer attempt a *Conversations with Ghosts*. They are interested in the voice and voicelessness, of time collapsing and scratchings of past lives in pre and post-colonial Albany.

Our explorations and the questions asked in the context of the *inConversation* exhibition will inform and expand on current debates about the challenges and benefits of inter- and cross-disciplinary collaboration in the arts. While collaboration within discrete artistic disciplines has been quite common, it is now becoming increasingly important for artists to look beyond their silos and invite interactions with researchers in other disciplines and art forms. Bozeman, Fay and Slade (2013) call for this kind of research into the significance of collaboration and its complexity. In this project our intent was to explore what complexity may mean in terms of the processes of practice-led research. According to Bozeman et al., (2013, p. 37) 'in order to truly examine interpersonal relationships and the comprehensive process of collaboration, researchers must move beyond simple demographic measures of subjects' and we would argue towards the experiential and the subjective. *inConversation* is interested in exploring how the push and pull of the collaborative process, by which the outcomes become more than the sum of the parts, plays out in a cross-disciplinary, creative context. Powles (as cited in Adams, 2008, p.22) argues 'knowledge is experienced through the work, it is the various relationships between the explanation of the work and the work itself via some type of methodology that makes it research'. While Borgdorff marvels on the surprising and personally challenging element of this kind of practice-led research that extends knowledge and challenges assumptions: 'the very practice of unsystematic drifting and searching – of which serendipity, chance inspirations and clues are an integral part – that takes artists onto new, unbroken ground (2009, p. 4).

Ultimately this project is conducted in the interests of further disseminating creative research as a conceptually rigorous platform in the wider academic realm. Doing so

will help to dismantle perceived barriers between cross-disciplinary creative research and 'traditional' academic scholarship. The entire project will surely leverage not only the creative outputs of our own creative artefacts but also document the challenges and benefits of collaborative processes as well as the art objects of others. We also hope that this process may lead to more traditional publication outputs that are based on reflection on the processes of collaboration. In addition it was our suspicion that networks of inter-/cross-disciplinary teams will also significantly enhance teaching and learning outcomes for supervision of creative HDR candidates across ECU. Hopefully these conversations will resonant with ongoing HDR candidates and help them to see how their work can be enriched by dialoguing with others and that this is an ongoing process, one that is performative in how it enacts the dialogue to which it has entered. In reference to what might be considered most 'potent' in coming together in any collaboration Clive Barstow, Maggi Phillips and Stuart Medley commented in their catalogue essay for the exhibition that if:

Our stitching together across disciplines creates a strange being or a monster of sorts, it may be instructive to remember that Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* began with a conversation which suggested playing with ghosts. She took up the suggestion and created an iconic monster birthed from the vulnerabilities of her experience. May this conversation unearth other monsters or unformed beings of intimacies and vision. (2014, p. 16)

Conclusion

It is the hope that *inConversation* will be viewed as a tool to increase research depth at ECU and foster a healthy and developing partnership between arts practice and modes of 'traditional' scholarship including discovering the kinds of multi-modal academic publications that cater for the particular skills and needs of artists, and identify any gaps in publication genres that could be useful in this field. We hope that collaborations such as *inConversation* can foster that kind of research culture that can embrace the messiness of ephemera and unquantifiable experiences that is creative research, while still meeting the needs of archiving practice, rigorous intellectual engagement and the dissemination of the outcomes. We also aim to increase the public profile and prestige of ECU's *Spectrum Project Space* and you never know, possible inclusion of future iterations of the exhibition in the *Perth International Arts Festival* (PIAF) or *Perth Fringe World Festival* from 2016 (and hence elevating the status of *Spectrum* in the process). Currently ECU has no visibility in either festival. Ultimately, art and our understanding of artistic practices may contribute to meeting the strategic research priority of ECU for maximizing social participation, which is arguably at its base the desire of all artists. As Borgdorff (2009) argues, 'the performative, world-constituting and world-revealing power of art lies in its ability to disclose to us new vistas, experiences and insights that bear upon our relationship with the world and with ourselves' (p. 14). From our perspective

inConversation has achieved this tenfold and we wouldn't have the messy never-endings such monstrous beasts of interdisciplinary collaboration are, any other way.

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