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Creative River Journeys: Using Reflective Practice Within a Practice-Led Research Context

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Stevenson, K. J., & Girak, S. (2013). Creative River Journeys: Using reflective practice within a practice led research context. In ACUADS Conference 2012: Region and Isolation: The changing function of art & design education within diasporic cultures and borderless communities. Perth, Western Australia. Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools. Available [here](#)

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Kylie Stevenson:

My PhD project is called Creative River Journeys and involves me working with a group of nine artist-researchers who are completing their Masters by Research or PhD at Edith Cowan University (ECU) and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA). These artist-researchers are from diverse artistic practices but can be loosely grouped into performing arts, language arts or visual arts. I identified these artist-researchers as all being engaged in practice-led research, though they did not necessarily use that term themselves.

Through a process of dialogue and reflection, each artist-researcher and I attempt to document the critical or significant moments in the development of their postgraduate project. In conceptualizing the project, I initially referred to the artist-researcher's synthesis of practice and research as praxis, following Stewart: 'my approach to research in the arts is to conceptualise it as critical, reflective, investigative praxis. Praxis, for me, involves the critical and inextricable meld of theory and practice' (2001, p.4). As the project progressed, I began to use the term practice-led research though it became clear that there were many terms used by artist-researchers to describe this meld of research and practice, for example, studio practice, practice-led research or reflexivity.

I am using a research methodology called *a/r/tography* (Irwin & de Cossen, 2004; Springgay *et al.*, 2008), an approach that explores the inter-relationship between the acts of art-making, research and teaching. La Jevic and Springgay state that *a/r/tography* is: 'an embodied query into the interstitial spaces between art-making, researching and teaching' (2008, p.68).

A/r/tography as a methodology matches the project in two ways. Firstly, it matches the conceptual framework of the project, as depicted in Figure 1, especially the project's three key areas of concern:

- Arts practice, which in this study embodies artistic making, reflection, knowledge and thinking;
- Research, particularly practice-led research and research about practice;
- Teaching, that is, the university teaching and learning context of the research, encompassing ideas about higher education, mentorship, collaboration, and academia.

CREATIVE RIVER JOURNEY INQUIRY INTO PRAXIS IN AN A/R/TOGRAPHY CONTEXT

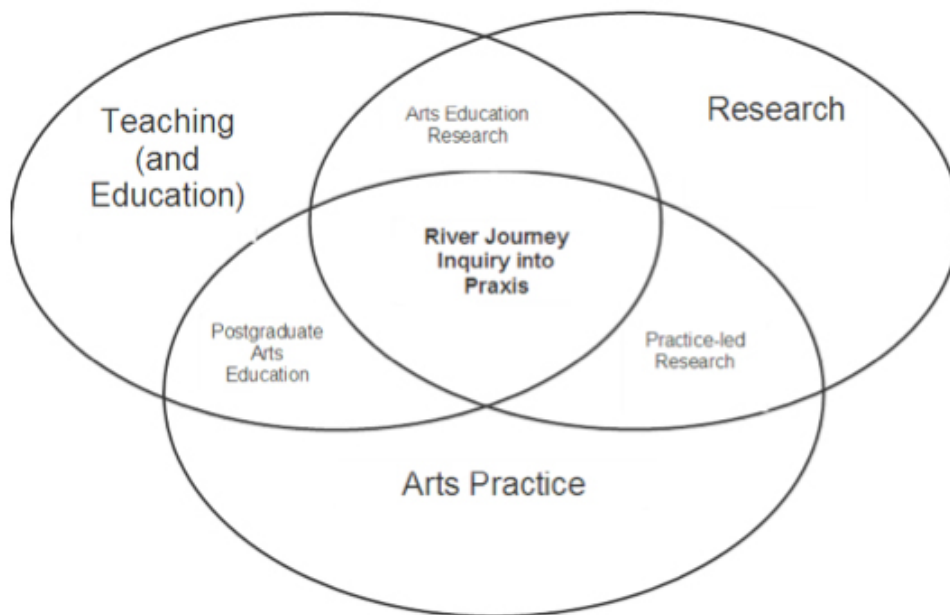


Figure 1: Creative River Journey Project conceptual framework

Secondly, *a/r/tography* matches my past professional and higher education expertise and best brings into play the polyphonous nature of my artist-researcher-teacher identity. In this way, *a/r/tographer* means I am concurrently:

- Artist: I have a background in practice-led research in creative writing. Part of my responses to my research findings are as a poet;
- Researcher: I have had extensive training in qualitative research methodology;
- Teacher: I have a lengthy background as an educator, and a lifelong interest in the transformative power of education.

The Creative River Journey project draws its title from the chart that I use to document my participants' creative practice called the River Journey chart. This chart has been applied in previous research projects, for example, interviews with children about their experiences of music (Burnard, 2000) and with arts educators to identify key influences in their career choices (Kerchner, 2006) and is illustrated in figure 2 below.

Creative River Journey: A critical moment river journey chart

(adapted from Kerchener, 2006, p. 128)

Name.....Date.....
Artwork/Performance/Text.....



Figure 2: Creative River Journey (for data capture in interviewing)

The charting of critical moments into a coherent narrative via the Creative River Journey tool combines the visual and the textual and it provides opportunities for deep reflection by the research participant. Burnard states: 'Like rivers, the words start to flow because the

participants, either on their own or with the help of their tutor/teacher or researcher, draw them in ways that they own and feel [are] appropriate.' (2004, p.8)

There have been three phases to the Creative River Journey project. In the first phase, I co-constructed with the research participants a record of the critical moments experienced whilst developing one work of art or one contained aspect of their practice.

In the second phase, I asked the research participants to independently construct their own record of the critical moments experienced whilst developing another work of art or aspect of their practice, using the Creative River Journey model. In this phase, I also included the possibility that the artist-researcher may use their own established method of reflection on the critical moments in their practice, for example, a reflective learning journal (Moon, 1999; Kerchner, 2006), or a visual journal (La Jevic & Springgay, 2008). In the third phase of the study, I asked the research participants to engage in a group process of collaborative reflection in which they shared their experiences of the Creative River Journey.

These three phases of my study engaged artist-researchers in a process of reflection on their arts practice in the research higher degree context. In designing the Creative River Journey project with process and reflection at its heart, and through an a/r/tography framework, I make clear that being in 'process' rather than examining 'a process' is important, as Winter, Belliveau and Sherritt state: 'In a/r/tography, process matters. This is because meaning is alive – always moving, always growing. A/r/tographers view constructions of knowledge as infinite and in-process' (2009, p.8).

The reflection on and in-process within the Creative River Journey project is also informed by Burnard's work on reflective arts practice:

Reflective arts practice, as with educational practice, features on the spot judgments, criticizing, restructuring, and testing of intuitive understanding of experienced phenomena [...] but what is different in *reflective arts practices* is the involvement of mutuality, engagement with artistic materials, multiple perspectives, individual style, and transformative participation in artistic endeavours in which reflective processes are central. (2006, p.10)

In a text guiding art and design students on the research process, Gray and Malin provide an excellent description of reflective practice as a means for transformative learning:

We learn most effectively by doing – by active experience, and reflection on that experience. We learn through practice, through research, and through reflection on both. This active and reflective learning makes a dynamic relationship between practice and research. Practice raises questions that can be investigated through research which in turn impacts on practice. (2004, p.1)

I have sought to elucidate the dynamic relationship between practice and research through the reflective arts practice in the Creative River Journeys project. This project is not seeking a snapshot of each artist-researcher's practice but instead aims for collaborative knowledge construction. Critical moments documented on the Creative River Journey chart are points of opening and expansion of knowledge for both the artist-researcher and myself.

One of the interesting findings from the project so far has been to do with terms applied to the artist-researchers' practice. As my participants are themselves conducting research, they are often arriving at an understanding of the dynamic relationship between practice and research, and some are yet to use many of the terms that could be used to describe this such as practice-led research, praxis, reflective arts practice and reflexivity. Whilst I have chosen to use the term reflective arts practice to describe the reflection in and on the act of creation, and practice-led research to describe the art-research nexus, reflexivity is a term used frequently by visual arts researchers at ECU and described thus: 'adopting a reflexive viewpoint allows an understanding of the creative process from a subjective viewpoint, revealing the dynamic relationship between the context, the construction and the articulation of the act' (Crouch, 2007, p.108).

I have used the term practice-led research (Barrett & Bolt, 2007; Haseman, 2007; Smith & Dean, 2009) to describe research by the artists across disciplines in my project, even when the artist-researchers themselves do not, as I see it as the most appropriate descriptor of their methodological framework. In doing so, I am informed by Haseman who suggests that 'of all the emerging nomenclatures, [...] Gray's "practice-led" research is an effective and serviceable term' (2007, p.147). Haseman, like many others, cites the work of Gray for a definition of practice-led research:

Firstly, research that is initiated in practice, where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the need of the practice and practitioners; secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly

methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray, 1996, p.3, cited by Haseman, 2007, p.147)

The best way to illustrate how the Creative River Journey project captures critical moments in practice-led research and elucidates the dynamic relationship between practice and research is by way of one of my artist-researchers who is co-author of this paper: Sue Girak. Girak is a conceptual artist, educator and research student with a deep interest in environmental sustainability and reuse of materials.

She is as an artist-researcher-teacher actively synthesising these three aspects in her own Masters project and teaching. Her participation in the project has been instrumental in giving breadth to the idea of teaching in *a/r/tography*, so that I now think of teaching, as it is described by Irwin *et al.*, as 'rhizomatic relations of living inquiry'.

A/r/tography is one of many emerging forms of inquiry that refer to the arts as a way of researching the world to enhance understanding. Yet it goes even further by recognizing the educative potential of teaching and learning as acts of inquiry.

Together the arts and education complement, resist and echo one another through rhizomatic relations of living inquiry. (Irwin *et al.*, 2006, p.70)

In the first phase, I documented the critical moments in the participant's practice in an hour and a half long interview, completing the Creative River Journey chart you will see in figures 3 and 4.

In this interview, Girak was often able to identify turning points in her project's development herself quite clearly. 'Turning points' could be related directly to the bends in the river used as a metaphor for the creative process in the Creative River Journey chart. For example, at the start of the interview when we were discussing what influenced her decision to do her Masters project, she stated:

What led me to doing the degree was my BA, and I suppose the turning point was when I was looking at environmental issues and I ... did a few pieces of work and they were commentary on global warming and one piece of work was called 'Five Degrees' which was a Shibori piece. (Girak, June 23, 2011, personal communication).

At other times, Girak communicated her critical moments in her own turn of phrase, for example, 'it struck a chord'. In this documented moment, she made complex connections between reading theory, her own sense of self, and her art practice:

I heard about Clive Hamilton so I wanted to read *Affluenza*. So I read *Affluenza* and it started talking about that need to consume and that sickness that we have to buy and consume. And I never thought I was a real consumer [...] and it struck a chord with me because we built this house that people would call a McMansion, and I was starting to think 'ooh, that's not who I thought I was, but obviously I am'. So in my head I didn't think I was this huge global footprinter but in my actions I am. So that's where I was struggling with the work (Girak, June 23, 2011, personal communication).

Girak was also able to clearly reflect on critical moments in her professional identity as an art educator. The following shows her noting the beginning of a mentoring relationship with a colleague who influenced her choice to explore her art education practice in academia:

I was hanging [my final BA exhibition] – this is a life-defining moment, I tell you – I was hanging my artwork up and she worked with my supervisor and she said "Do you know of any...[art teachers]? [...]" and so [my supervisor] said to me 'Would you like to do two days a week?' (Girak, June 23, 2011, personal communication).

The participant will now discuss her participation in the Creative River Journey project from her perspective.

Creative River Journey: A critical moment river journey chart

(adapted from Kerchener, 2006, p. 128)

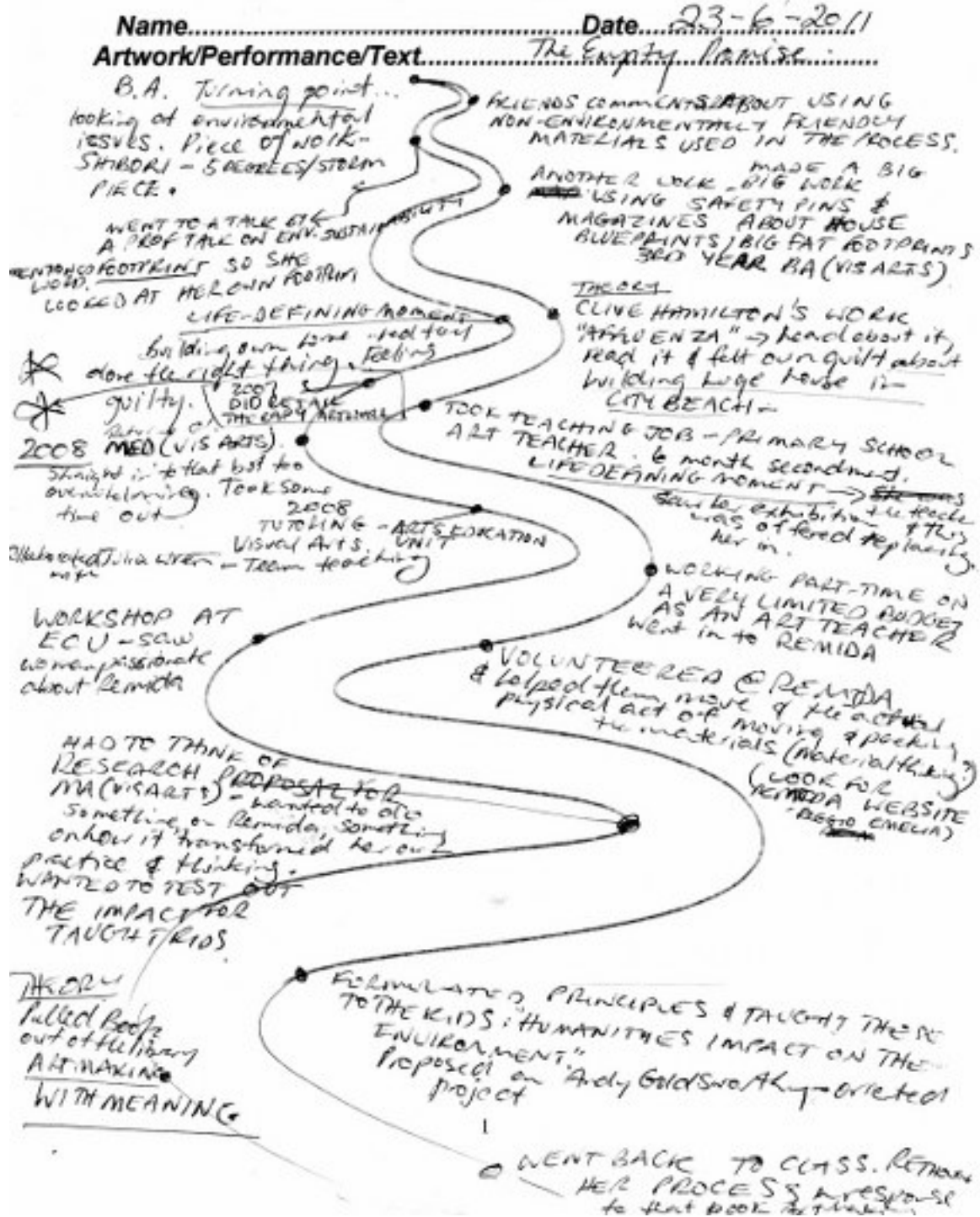
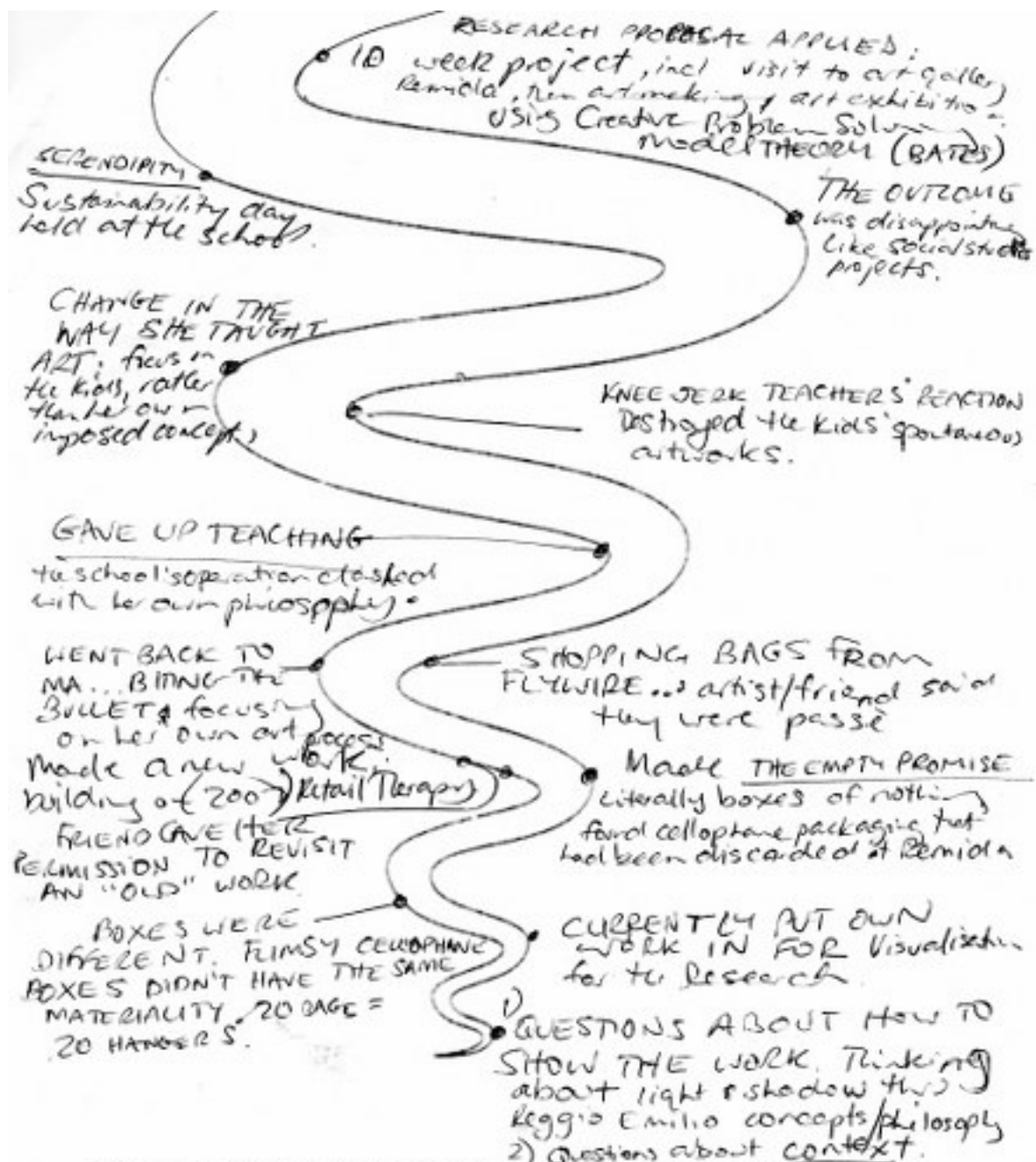


Figure 3: Creative River Journey chart for participant phase one – page 1



Reference: p. 128, Kerchener, J. (2006). 'Tools for developing Reflective Skills', in Burnard, P. and Hennessey, S. Eds., *Reflective Practices in Arts Education*, Springer: The Netherlands, pp123-135.

Retail Therapy Artwork
Embodied Affluence
Consumerist nation

Creative Problem Solving
Model
BATES

Figure 4: Creative River Journey chart for participant phase one – page 2

Sue Girak:

I am an a/r/tographer. That is the most accurate term to describe who I am in regards to my arts practice-led research. The rhizomatic nature of this methodology (Irwin *et al.*, 2006) embodies who I am and what I do. I cannot tease out each identity and place them in little boxes. A/r/tography does not exist for me in that way.

Though I am many things, principally I am an artist-teacher because my arts practice shapes my teaching practice and vice versa. As a teacher I want my students to have greater autonomy in the way they make their art by following similar processes that artists use. I am also an artist-researcher because my preferred mode of communicating my research is through my art. Furthermore, I am a researcher-teacher as my research has allowed me to articulate my tacit knowledge of pedagogy and make it possible to build upon my understandings. Therefore, as an a/r/tographer I go off on endless tangents continually learning and applying theory to my practice.

I had not heard of the project before Stevenson asked me to participate in her research. I accepted her offer immediately because I was looking for a way to document my reflective approach to practice. In my Masters study, one outcome is a solo exhibition and at the time of our first meeting I had chosen only a single artwork for my show. As such, when I met up with the Stevenson for our first interview, I was struggling.

As discussed earlier, the Creative River Journey provides opportunities for deep reflection. Through Stevenson's initial questioning I was able to pinpoint why I was struggling. I kept focusing on my previous research during my B.A. and couldn't move on. Stevenson gave me time to talk about past works and reflect on how they had shaped my current practice. Of course I had talked about my art before but I had not taken the time to truly reflect or identify critical moments that directed my practice. The first phase of the Creative River Journey enabled me to clarify my thoughts. I became more confident to express my ideas and move on from my B.A. to further develop concepts into new works for my M.Ed.

As part of the second phase of the project, I was asked to create my own Creative River Journey documenting another artwork. I found this part of the process more challenging than the first as I wanted to have the same level of interaction with Stevenson that I had experienced during Phase One. My reasoning was that through the interactive nature of a dialogue, I would be more likely to recall significant events. Another benefit of dialogue is that I often find myself arriving at new critical moments when I am asked to clarify my

thoughts and ideas. Often these moments of clarity occur when I am talking to my friends. As part of my methodology I have chosen to have regular conversations with a particular friend, which I record. These conversations are a record of my process and progress.

Considering I am an artist it would be reasonable to assume that the visual cue of the Creative River Journey would be helpful but I found it distracting. So when I was asked to write down my reflections, I felt torn. I wanted to fulfil my commitment to Stevenson but I wasn't sure how I could make the experience authentic. For me having to record my critical moments on paper made the process feel contrived since this was not the way I was used to reflecting. Finally, I abandoned the chart and decided to include a mix of diary entries and reflections.

Many of the aspects I reflected on in Phase Two did not become resolved artworks but this did not make the process pointless. On the contrary, by utilising a tool that enabled me to reflect-in-action (Schön, 1983) I was able to sift through my ideas and focus on the ones that showed the greatest potential. By participating in the Creative River Journey I began to recognise the signposts that were directing my practice. I became more confident and did not feel the need to act on every idea I had. Rather, I began to appreciate the importance of generating ideas as part of the creative process.

The final phase of the research project was a focus group where a number of Stevenson's participants discussed how they applied the Creative River Journey in order to enhance their own practices. Even though participants came from a broad range of arts disciplines, I found that in many cases our creative process was the same. This was beneficial to me. As I come from an arts education background, I have limited opportunities to discuss with other artists how they make their art. As an *artist/photographer*, this phase gave me a greater insight into the creative process, which I intend to apply to my teaching and visual arts practice.

As a result of participating in the Creative River journey research I have become more focused when making art. By identifying critical moments that have shaped my arts practice, I was able to identify key themes that became a consolidated body of work consisting of sculptural pieces and photographic works. I found it astounding how quickly my ideas began to move from abstract concepts into visual representations of my research. In November 2011, I had one finished artwork along with a number of germinating ideas. By April 2012, I was able to have a trial exhibition where I could consider curatorial issues in preparation for my solo exhibition. Although I adapted the Creative River Journey to support my needs, I

found it a valuable tool that enabled me to effectively reflect-in-action and to circumvent the rhizomatic meanderings that often accompany my a/r/tography.

Stevenson & Girak:

As co-authors, we have offered insights into the Creative River Journey project from theoretical and practical perspectives. We have sought to illustrate how the reflective arts practice in the project fosters knowledge construction within the practice-led research context. We have demonstrated how the project's use of independent and collaborative conversation and reflection provides the means to documents the critical moments in the participant's creative and research practice. Thus, we have identified the Creative River Journey itself as a useful tool in the methodological repertoire of practice-led researchers.

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