IMAGINATIONS

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A Research-Creation Episteme? Practices, Interventions, Dissensus
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Image credit: Mergler, Agata. "Flowers no 6", wet cyanotype contact print and digital rendering. Poznań, 2022.

INTRODUCTION

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I n the autumn of 2023, on October 30th, we organized a conference entitled "A Research-creation Episteme? Practice-based Research and Institutional Critique," at Trent University, Peterborough. Our idea for the conference came about during Congress 2023 at the annual meeting of the Canadian Comparative Literature Association/Association Canadienne de Littérature Comparée (CCLA/ACLC) at York University, Toronto, in partnership with their research group, Comparative Materialities: Media, Literature, Theory. The outcome of the conference became the motivation to complete this special issue of *Imaginations*.

The conference planning was inspired by the recent wave of interest in practice-based research and artistic research. We wanted to ask some fundamental questions about how these approaches were shaping discussions in the humanities. We wanted to explore how creative work relates to knowledge and research, and whether (and how) to draw a line between research and creation—assuming there ought to be one. We wanted to examine how universities have altered the way knowledge is organized and shared, how they have permitted visual arts in particular to be included in scholarly work, and at what cost to arts or scholarship, and whether all these changes have affected how research is evaluated and awarded.

Some of the specific questions that we asked include the following:

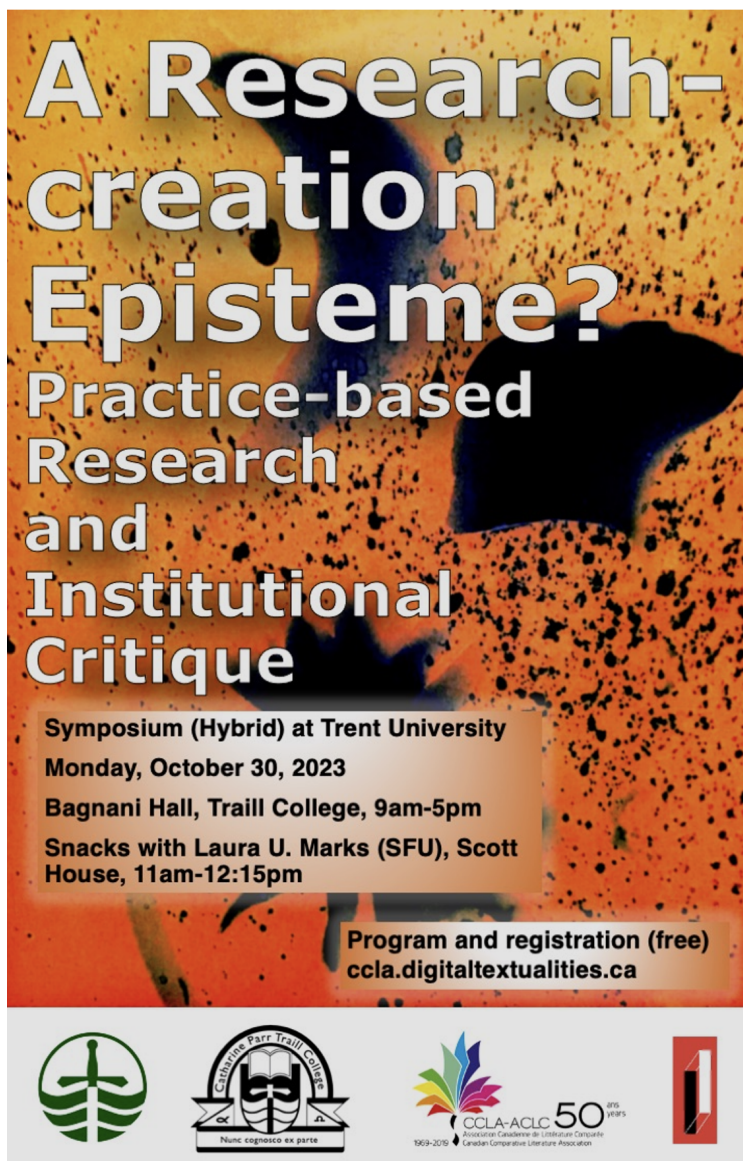- What is the boundary dividing creative from non-creative practices?

Figure 1: Conference poster.

- What are approaches that artists have adopted to transfer their practice into a knowledge-producing milieu?

- What are the fora for presenting research-creative projects, and who are the audiences?

- How does academic research-creation respond to the demand for community involvement and accountability? What are the institutional guarantees?

- How has artistic value been redirected to meet the university's market demands (distinct from those of the culture industries)?

- How do creative works develop pathways through the established benchmarks of securing research funding? How have funding agencies responded to these shifts, and are they viable?

- What are the implications of developing work under different linguistic, national, regional, or global conceptual umbrellas (e.g. "practice-based" vs. "practice-led")?

- What does research-creation entail for undergraduate teaching, graduate supervision, and mentorship?

- How does a research-creative knowledge form comply with the evaluation rubrics for hire, reappointment, tenure, and promotion?

- How do creative outputs advance causes of equity and access?

- To what extent does research-creation, modelled as an intervention, participate in the ongoing labour to decolonize universities?

- What does research-creation reveal for reputedly "traditional" researchers about their own practices?

- What are such researchers afraid of when they encounter research-creative projects?

- What does the diversification of knowledges and methods add to historical debates on the subject, and whom do these serve?

In organizing the conference, we were aware that many of these questions had been asked before in different contexts, to larger audiences, and led to bigger outcomes. Putting our stamp on them was part of recognizing that these issues, significant as they were for many, were still consequential for our own practices, scholarship, and academic community. It became important to examine these questions on our terms. Further to this, we entered the debates surrounding research-creation knowing that consensus about its impact would never be achieved. On the contrary, we felt then, as we do now, that a community of artistic and practice-based researchers ought to welcome dissension into their ranks. The conference and this special issue was never meant to be the last word on the subject.

For the meeting in October 2023, we invited scholars, including faculty and graduate students, artists, practitioners, creatives, and collaborators to deliver short, 5-minute "manifestos" that explore at least one aspect of the emerging episteme. Thanks to the short presentation format, focused on the main claims forming the manifestos devoid of the sometimes pesky detail of presentations, as well as thanks to the hybrid format of the conference, we were able to host over 30 speakers on that day. We organized the contributor manifestos into themes such as design, autotheory, decolonization, care, the artmaking process, collaboration (with humans, plants, and machines), dissemination and circulation, pedagogy, theory, gesture, and critique. Several panels were led by Professor Laura U. Marks (Simon Fraser University), who was at Trent that week as a Visiting Traill College Fellow.

Following the meeting, we got to work on an editorial project inspired by contributions at the symposium for the journal. Part of the effort to achieve this goal involved rethinking academic peer review. Our aim was to develop a more collegial format where authors could be encouraged both to participate in the review process and to get involved in community building with others. We settled on a review in two stages: first, a conventional double-blind review of each article by an expert in the field, consistent with the journal's guidelines; second, a collegial review of *actual* peers. For the latter, we paired authors together and asked them to comment on each other's work.

Figure 2: A Research-creation Episteme? Practice-based Research and Institutional Critique. Trent University, October 30, 2023.

We then held a Zoom meeting with each author group, facilitated by at least one of us, but often both. After the meetings, we wrote decision letters that were informed by the anonymous review, the author's comments, results from the meetings, and our own assessment of the process. For a detailed evaluation of our peer review and how it could/should be considered a form of research-creation, see Synenko, this issue.

In the end, we were able to publish eleven articles, one work of poetry, and two "afterwords," for a total of fourteen works. We have divided these into five thematic sections. In the first section, *co-creation*, Monique Tschofen offers a critically theoretical insight into her own journey from a position of more theoretically engaged writing on research-creation to one informed by creative and collaborative practice within an artistic research collective. Anna Foran and Ami Xherro let readers look into their collaborative creative research process by staging a written dialogue between both artist-researchers as they talk about their work on *Circumfluence* events, which combined learning and intimacy/solidarity with collaborative

creation. In the second section, *practicing art - practicing knowledge*, Mehvish Rather explores Kashmiri "guerilla pedagogy" as a means to probe the decolonizing force of research-creation, examining how collectivizing approaches to knowledge dissemination prove to be crucial to surviving under difficult regimes. María Angélica Madero and James Carney, from the contrasting position of an experimental pedagogy institution, discuss "abduction" as a method of dealing with the common Western institutional conditions of creative research. These conditions are detrimental to the art process and artistic research because they reduce the pluralist work in art to a much narrower concept of labour as a form of linearity (where labour is equal to a source of remuneration). Approaching the linearity of research and writing, Jonathan Lahey Dronsfield proposes a form of writing with each of its sections starting as separate and new, and thus he creates a monadic assembly of beginnings in which art, and the episteme of artistic research (and knowledge production in general), are questioned through theory and examples of artistic practice. In the third section, *exploring methods*, Karen Sung's text goes beyond focusing on creation as a research process to present an application of artistic research methods, specifically using participatory arts-based research method to generate insight into the cultural and personal identity of participants. Jasper van Vught and Stefan S. Werning also present an application of research-creation methods that aim at social impact in the area of teaching, with a goal of a more inclusive approach that is aligned with discursive game design. In the fourth section, *beyond the human*, Steve 4. Tu leads us through a research-creation project on communication with other-than-human species like trees. He adopts a method of "duoethnography" to question the institutional conditions for exploring such methods, especially for decolonial or other critical goals. Oriana Confente follows similarly posthuman research interests in non-human species in exploring possible interspecies collaborations in artistic practice and their meanings for art, knowledge production, and ethics. In the fifth section, *writing and de-writing*, exploring simultaneously the worn-out academic form of an essay and that of the soundtrack as an illustration of a narrative, Martin Arnold refutes our expectations in

order to question the representative character of these forms. Margot Mellet offers a novel approach to writing that she calls de-writing, which in this initiating research she develops theoretically with support from the media-archeological thought of Kittler, Derridean deconstruction, and other theoretical concepts focused on écriture, machinic writing, and digital writing. Meanwhile Concetta Principe, reaching out to some similar theoretical sources, Derrida and Lacan, develops a poetical "ultimate showdown" with the research themes and concepts she encountered in her scholarly work.

In our afterwords, we have chosen to develop reflections on different aspects of this intensive project: Agata Mergler focuses on the theoretical depth of research creation or artistic research, of knowledge production with arts in academia, and of its revolutionary abilities to question current knowledge production systems. She speculates, comparing artistic knowledge production with the philosophical task of thinking, whether artistic research has not been part of art practice for a while and whether it is capable of bringing a pluralism of methods and knowledges to save both knowledge and art practices against the commodification of both disguised as innovation. Joshua Synenko reflects on our collegial peer review as a research-creation experiment. Mindful of the epistemic and institutional contexts that inspire debates about research-creation, and given the repeated patterns of university management, Synenko advocates abolishing the term altogether.

Often, the goal of academic writing and publishing is to convince the reader of a set of arguments, propositions, or statements. In this project, which began in earnest in the spring of 2023, ending here with the special issue a year and a half later, the goal has been diligent and determined but not lofty. It is simply to convince the reader that these offerings contribute to the ongoing discussion about research-creation, with a focus on its institutional contexts and questions about its legitimacy, and to provide an indicator of where the debate might be headed.

IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: Conference poster.

Figure 2: A Research-creation Episteme? Practice-based Research and Institutional Critique. Trent University, October 30, 2023.