# ART IN THE PUBLIC SPHERE: WHAT ARTISTS AND COMMUNITY PARTNERS SAY ABOUT 'ARTISTIC RESEARCH' AND THE ARTISTIC ANIMATION OF SMALLER COMMUNITIES[1]

W. F. Garrett-Petts (with contributions from Bonnie Klohn)
*Thompson Rivers University, Canada*

Abstract: For the last dozen years the Small Cities Community–University Research Alliance – a major initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada – has been championing a research agenda where university-based artists and artistic inquiry have taken a lead role in defining and contributing to community cultural engagement. The research addresses the proposition that we consider "art *as* a public sphere," examining how artist-researchers participating in community–university alliances contribute new critical perspectives, new forms of inquiry, and new circumstances useful for the creative animation of public spaces. The alliance also points to the difficulty in framing and maintaining a shared recognition of how the arts are valued, even among members of the CURA research team.

Resumo: Durante os últimos 12 anos, a Small Cities Community-University Research Alliance – uma iniciativa do Conselho de Ciências Sociais e Humanidades do Canadá – tem vindo a realizar investigações em que artistas da universidade e a pesquisa artística desempenharam um papel importante para definir e contribuir para o envolvimento cultural da comunidade. A investigação parte da ideia de que consideramos a "arte *como* esfera pública", e analisa a forma como os investigadores artistas que participam em parcerias entre a comunidade e a universidade contribuem para novas perspetivas críticas, novas formas de pesquisa e novas circunstâncias úteis para a animação criativa de espaços públicos. A parceria aponta também para a dificuldade de enquadrar e conservar um reconhecimento partilhado de como as artes são avaliadas, mesmo entre os membros da equipa de investigação da CURA.

## Introduction

If not by definition, then certainly by default, culture and (increasingly) creativity are associated with big city life: big cities are equated commonly with big culture and heightened creativity; small cities with something less. Yet an overwhelming majority of cities in North America have fewer than 100,000

residents. Of the 346 Canadian municipalities with populations greater than 10,000, only 47 of these are over 100,000 – and only 23 have populations greater than 200,000. In other words, over 90% of Canada's towns and cities have fewer than 100,000 residents; in the United States, 97% of its cities have fewer than 50,000 residents (Brennan et al., 2005). Remarkably, most of the existing research literature on the impact of artists on the development of creative cities has focused exclusively on large urban centres.

In *Where Good Ideas Come From,* Steven Johnson asks, "What are the spaces that have historically led to unusual rates of creativity and innovation?" Johnson's wonderfully engaging and important book echoes the prevailing discourse of urban revitalization and associates creativity with urban scale, claiming that "as cities get bigger, they generate ideas at a faster clip" (2010: 10). The indicators of creativity are important here: Johnson – like Richard Florida and others – adds up the number of patents and inventions generated per capita and finds that "despite all the noise and crowding and distraction, the average resident of a metropolis with a population of five million people was almost three times more creative than the average resident of a town of a hundred thousand" (pp. 10-11). Johnson then asks us to ponder: What makes residents of big city environments so much more creative and innovative than residents of smaller places?

The proposition is a partially misleading one, however, for it assumes that a tabulation of patents and inventions is the most significant measure of creativity and innovative potential. It does not account for how a critical mass of art and artists might inform urban animation and creative city planning, and perhaps most surprisingly, virtually no attention has been given to the proposition that, under certain conditions, the impact of art and artists may be amplified in smaller places. John Bratton and I (2005) have discussed elsewhere how smaller cities narrow the divide between creativity and work, the rural and the urban, the individual and the community – how social proximity affects political realities, including access to productive collaborations, media attention, and active participation in decision-making.[2] Still, I remain impressed by the case Johnson and others make for 'the city' as a creative space; but after reading Johnson's book I've come away even more convinced than ever that we need to develop scale-specific indicators of success, including those for quality of life, culture, creativity, and the productive interventions and innovations contributed by artists – especially in smaller cities.[3]

Assessments of big city creativity remain tied to certain kinds of outcome measures, in general to traditional notions of productivity and energy

consumption. If, however, we look at a community's creative capital in terms of cultural capacity building – social networking, levels of engagement and participation, community valuing and appreciation of the arts, and both formal and informal infrastructure development in terms of facilities, organizations, and visible municipal leadership – we get a very different picture. In their literature review of how the arts and culture prosper in smaller communities, Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell (2011) identify five reoccurring community factors and critical ingredients:

1. *An underlying appreciation and attitude of acceptance* toward local culture, history, people and assets, and a community's "sense of place";
2. *A valuing of the arts in everyday life,* and an inclusive encouragement of broad-based participation;
3. Key leadership roles representing the broad community, and *a community--based coalition willing to work* toward a common goal;
4. *Social networks of key volunteers and arts supporters* who work on exhibitions, festivals, community cultural development projects; support artists in their community-regeneration efforts; and inclusively encourage vibrancy among all cultural groups in a community; and
5. Cultural infrastructure development – Cultural facilities and centres are important "gathering places," functioning as a cornerstone of community cohesion and community building. Support for this infrastructure, either as part of new developments or as maintenance of existing facilities, is essential to create *a visible focus of efforts and to offer a physical point of contact for diverse community groups*. (p. 115; emphasis added)

Note how cultural prosperity is tied to attitudes and values, and to a public recognition of culture's role in community sustainability. Part of this picture is encouraging, for smaller places, we've found, tend to boast a highly committed core of volunteers, with extraordinary opportunities for direct and indirect involvement in the arts (Dubinsky, 2005). In such settings, the presence of, say, artist-run galleries seems a more appropriate indicator of creative and cultural health than the number of patents. However, despite relatively high levels of volunteerism and cultural participation, including participation in artistic activities, most citizens of smaller communities tend to share the bias that creativity and culture are located 'elsewhere'. Modesty and insecurity and self-deprecation flourish in smaller places. Even more remarkably, most residents of smaller places do not see the arts as having a direct or profound impact on their everyday lives.

A few years ago, a member of our research group, Alex Michalos, surveyed five small Canadian cities, asking residents to assess the impact of the arts on their personal quality of life (Michalos and Kahlke, 2008). This was the first time such a study had been undertaken. Michalos and Kahlke investigated associations between the time invested in and satisfaction obtained from arts activities on the one hand and seven different measures of the overall quality of people's lives on the other; further, he looked at all associations in the presence of a number of other features of respondents' lives, such as features concerning demographics, motives, participation in non-arts-related activities and satisfaction obtained from a variety of domains of life, like family relations, friendships, housing, and a sense of meaning in life.

The arts-related activity with the highest percentage of participants was going to films (cinema, movie theatres). Other activities were, in ranked order, going to concerts, attending community events, going to historic and heritage sites, and going to art museums and galleries.

The study found that while people most frequently think of painting and/or drawing when they hear the word *arts* or the phrase *artistic activity*, the most frequently mentioned "most important" arts-related activity in the total sample and in each community involved music in some form, particularly listening to music and singing alone. Singing in a group, the researchers discovered, gave participants a relatively low level of satisfaction.

Overall, however, Michalos's study found a troubling result: when surveyed, residents of small cities reported no significant correlation between their participation in the arts and their quality of life. Given the economic and social impact of the arts documented in creative sector reports on these communities, such results seem all the more remarkable – and point to, I speculate, a social disconnect between the role played by the arts and their perceived impact on daily living. Such a disconnect has serious implications for social and cultural planning.

Indeed, following Pippa Norris's (2001) observations on the nature of civic engagement generally, we can think of the "culturally prosperous community" as dependent upon a shared public recognition that the arts are valuable: *cultural knowledge* (what the community knows about the arts), *cultural trust* (the community's support for the value of the arts), and *cultural participation* (the community's level of arts activity) are key factors in developing the creative small city or small town. Our research program into the cultural futures of small cities has encouraged us to appreciate more fully the importance of art and artists

in developing this shared recognition – and Michalos's study only underscores how fragile this shared recognition (in particular, the link between the arts and quality of life) can be.

Part of the problem may be that too often artists are drawn into social and cultural planning discussions after the fact, if at all – that is, once the substantive planning and funding issues have been largely resolved. As a result, the literature on cultural and urban planning has little to say about the planning potential of artistic viewpoints, artistic interventions, and the creative animation of cities and towns; instead, references to artists and their cultural work are more typically included as illustrations and examples – not as arguments. According to Jonathan Metzger (2011), there exists a "nascent interest in planner–artist collaborations," but virtually no critical consideration of how such collaborations might work (their feasibility and value). Metzger calls the rationale for bringing art and artists into the planning process "generally patchy and ... under--theorized" (p. 213), and he encourages a shift of focus from " 'art in the public sphere' ... [to] art *as* a public sphere" (p. 214, italics in original).

Where Metzger focuses on art and artists in general, our work for the last dozen years has taken place in the context of a "community–university research alliance" – a major research initiative of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. We've thus been practising and reflecting on a research agenda where university-based artists and artistic inquiry have taken a lead role in defining and contributing to the community's cultural engagement. The following report extends Metzger's proposition that we consider "art *as* a public sphere," examining how our participating artist-researchers contribute new critical perspectives, new forms of inquiry, and new circumstances useful



Figure 1.  Figures in this article illustrate some of the interdisciplinary collaborations involving artist-researchers within the CURA projects. Town hall meetings, collaborations between the local government and the university, drew hundreds of local citizens to discuss the cultural, social, economic, and environmental future of small cities. These discussions were often complemented by art exhibitions and panel presentations. *Best Foot Forward*, an initiative of the *walking:lab* (November 2009), contributed to the City's transportation and walking plan.

for the creative animation of public spaces. Our experience also points to the difficulty in framing and maintaining a shared recognition of how we value the arts, even among members of our own research team.

**The Small Cities CURA**

For the last 12 years we have been exploring the notion of artistic research – in particular, on the community-based knowledge production of artists working within the academy. This exploration began with the Small Cities Community–University Research Alliance, or CURA (2001 to 2006), and became a defining element of our current CURA, "Mapping the Quality of Life and Culture of Small Cities" (2006 to present). These two interdisciplinary research programs (the first initiated by the Kamloops Art Gallery in collaboration with Thompson Rivers University in Kamloops, British Columbia; the second a follow-up program initiated by the University) are supported by large national grants and significant community contributions, and are focused on issues of cultural sustainability and quality of life in small city settings. In particular, the 26 researchers (drawn primarily from the social sciences and humanities: English, education, film studies, geography, history, social work, sociology, philosophy, political science, rhetoric, theatre studies, and the visual arts) have been exploring notions of social capital and community asset building in communities of 100,000 population and smaller.

The Mapping Quality of Life and the Culture of Small Cities initiative has advanced its research program locally, nationally, and internationally over the past five years through various community-based research projects, city-wide activities, and a range of publications, presentations, and policy meetings in order to successfully meet its initial objectives to identify and explore quality of life and cultural challenges and potential of small urban centres. Indeed, by exploring cultural realities and mediations that give form and meaning to small cities, the CURA has begun to contribute significantly to the literature about quality of life indicators, cultural indicators, community development, modes of artistic inquiry, and arts and culture pertaining to small cities.

Employing an interdisciplinary approach to develop qualitative indicators and quality of life measures designed to explore aspects of cultural formation, the CURA is comprised of seven complementary clusters of one, two, and three-year research projects, with each cluster collectively addressing ways to better understand, visualize, and improve the social, organizational, and narrative networks that define small city cultures. In turn, research results and

applications from all clusters are incorporated into the larger project, and then disseminated and applied in consultation with our community partners and a cross-country network facilitated by our national partners.

This alliance brings together a national 'community of interest' and selected 'communities of place', and involves key researchers and partners, thus mobilizing resources and expertise for a stable, community-based research program. Our non-academic partners include a local and regional network of community researchers. These include the Kamloops Art Gallery, offering continuity between research programs and an extensive record of community networking; the Kamloops and Skeetchestn Indian Bands, offering an Aboriginal perspective often missing from previous quality of life studies; the Make Children First Initiative, a community network devoted to supporting programs and research for families and children; the AIDS Society of Kamloops and the Rural Women's Network, with their local, regional, and national reach; the BC Wildlife Park and the Kamloops Museum and Archives – cultural organizations with an established research and publication profile; the Banff Centre, an organization recognized internationally for its contributions to the arts; the Kamloops-South Thompson Sustainable Community Atlas Project and the Thompson-Nicola Regional District, two organizations dedicated to mapping regional indicators and data and providing sustainable local government services.



Figure 2. A key venue for the community–university researchers was the "research cabaret" series, hosted by the university. These informal gatherings provided an opportunity to present issues and share research in progress. Here, tourism professor Robin Reid co-presents her preliminary findings with student research assistant and community activist Bonnie Klohn at *Exploring the Role of Community Gardens in the Small City*, March 2011. The final research results were shared later that year at the symposium on *Animation of Public Space through the Arts: Innovation and Sustainability*, September 2011, University of Coimbra, Portugal.

The interest in artistic forms of inquiry and the role of artists in community-
-based research arose from our work with these community partners – and,
as noted, was especially inspired by our work with the Kamloops Art Gallery.
In 2005, we hosted an international symposium on 'artistic inquiry'; and in 2008,
in collaboration with the Banff Centre, we ran a 6-week residency devoted to
exploring notions of artistic research and community development.

In this context, creative place-making – with a focus on quality of life,
mapping, visual and verbal representation, notions of home and community,
and the need to define a local sense of place – has emerged as an important
theme. Now that the Small Cities research program is entering its final phase,
we've begun to reflect in greater detail on the roles played by our university-
-based artist-researchers.

### Involvement of artist-researchers in community-based research

From the beginning – and with an art gallery as the initial lead partner – the
directors of the Small Cities CURA saw the potential for 'displaying' research
as an important means of public dissemination. Once the research program was
underway, at the first major meeting of researchers and community partners, the
group reviewed its goals for (1) collaboration and assessment, (2) new partners
and alliances, (3) additional funding possibilities, and (4) communications and
dissemination strategies. In addition, Lon Dubinsky and I, as co-directors for
the initial research program, presented a brief on the potential involvement of
artists (Dubinsky and Garrett-Petts, 2002).

The prospect of including the artists was suggested as an example of
how new researchers could be drawn into the project, in this case through
culminating exhibitions that documented the projects and presented artistic
work reflecting major project concerns. The program quickly moved to attach
artists, mainly visual arts faculty members, to projects as they arose. In the
meeting, we noted that this enhanced use of artist-participants complemented
the progress of several current projects, and was generally supported by an
increasing interest in interdisciplinarity and community-based public art,
especially "new genre public art" as defined by Suzanne Lacy (where the
creative focus centres more on the relationship between place and audience
than on the object). We envisaged several possibilities, each contingent
upon agreement by the researcher(s), community partner, and artist(s) for
each project. For example, some artists might participate fully as researchers
with their work incorporated into, if not in some cases synonymous with, a

specific project. In other cases, artists, we speculated, might work as more detached observers.

Since the first CURA, the research group has refined the roles of artist-researchers, with the artists now following one of three inquiry models: (1) *Affinity* – where the artist matches existing work with issues under exploration by a particular research group; (2) *Response* – where the artist creates new work responding directly to the particular research group's project; and, most importantly, (3) *Integration* – where the artist works with a particular research group, becoming in effect a co-researcher by committing skills, insights, vocabulary, qualitative problem-solving methods, and art production to the research process and findings. Integrated research initiatives, we've found, put increased demands on artists to explore and create both visually *and* verbally; we've begun to understand better how the university *research* emphasis (replete with its relatively entrenched expectations for traditional publication and exhibition outcomes) distinguished the work of artist-researchers from those working exclusively in the realm of public art and community advocacy. For the artist-researchers working within the community–university alliance, their practice necessarily involves attention to place, audience, object, interdisciplinarity, multiple literacies, *and* research.

A key aspect of our first CURA, an aspect continued in the current CURA, thus became the inclusion of artist-researchers, practising university-based artists working alongside academic colleagues and community partners. We have been encouraged by the potential we see for linking creative inquiry to more traditional methods of research; and we've found that the presence of working artists as co-researchers (Doug Buis, John Craig Freeman, Laura Hargrave, Ernie Kroeger, Donald Lawrence, Eileen Leier, Ashok Mathur, Adelheid Mers, Melinda Spooner, and Craig Saper) provides enhanced access to, and credibility with, the cultural communities of our participating cities: as one of our partner organizations in Australia found when employing artists in the "Small Towns: Big Picture" project, "While the development of sustainability indicators is of academic interest to those working in the field of ... performance evaluation, the [Small Towns] research would have been an insignificant blip in the community's experience if it had not been for the involvement of the artists" (M. Rogers, personal communication, June 9, 2005; Rogers and Collins, 2001). Involving participating artists and engaging communities via locally developed cultural projects promotes dialogue and social interaction, and the possibility for contributing new knowledge.

As our interdisciplinary teams learn to accommodate alternative forms of researching, the artist-researchers themselves have prompted further self--reflection and even a rethinking of our three inquiry models. For example, Donald Lawrence (a contributing photographer, installation artist, and university professor) circulated the following email correspondence, an illustrated rough draft of speaking notes for a conference presentation that became the subject of ongoing discussion:

I understand the "artist/researcher" model to be one in which an artist both affects and is affected by academic culture. As a researcher [involved in] the first CURA I worked in a mode that was considered "integrated," in which one or more artists worked as integral members of a research group .... In this manner of working my own artistic practice did not come into play and, rather, my artist's "working knowledge" was drawn upon to determine means of working with community participants and research assistants (who might themselves be working as



Figure 3.  This image, an original watercolour, was embedded in the email circulated by Donald Lawrence. *Kamloops – Tranquille*, 2007.

practising artists). In the present [research] group I am collaborating in a similar manner but also with an interest in creating my own artistic work in parallel and in dialogue with many of the group's other research activities. This realm of artistic inquiry is, in effect, a fourth category, the embracing of an essentially traditional mode of creative "exploration" that complements those previously identified modes of "integration," "response" and "affinity."

The interest (among myself and the other artist/researchers of the CURA group) in working in the manner of artistic "exploration" suggests a schism between artistic practice and artists' involvement in academically--inclined research. However, a further look at "my own" artistic practice during the time period of the [first research] project speaks to something more of a recursive migration of questions and practice across the realms of artistic and academic inquiry, and the opening-up of new modes of artistic exploration. (D. Lawrence, personal communication, October 16, 2007)

I've quoted at length here because adding the new category has become important generally for the artist-researchers. While appreciating the advantages of categorizing artistic research into modes, they nonetheless felt (and continue to feel) the modes as somehow limited, as not speaking to the way artists actually think and practice. It is worth noting that the distinction was initially lost on many of the non-artists, who questioned whether so broad a notion as *exploration* could be considered a distinctive mode, arguing that including it would set up a kind of faulty parallelism. However, by claiming *exploration* as a fourth category or mode *complementing* the other three, the artists, we believe now, were indirectly asserting a critique of the disciplinary logic and assumptions informing the creation of such categories: notions of integration, response, and affinity positioned the artists, but these categories did not fully acknowledge the alternative forms of thinking, researching, and making that the artists were bringing to the projects; the categories did not speak to the way artists characteristically moved among such categories, 'opening up' rather than closing down new modes of inquiry.



Figure 4. The *Making Artistic Inquiry Visible* (MAIV) artist residency at The Banff Centre (May-June 2008) brought together 29 artists, cultural workers, writers, critics, and curators from Europe, Great Britain, and North America. Together the participants practised (and reflected on the nature of) artistic inquiry and interdisciplinary collaboration.

**Research update: Toward an alternative academic discourse**
A new research program, "Making Interdisciplinary Inquiry Visible," has recently emerged from the CURA work and builds on these earlier research experiences, looking to better define and understand the potential contributions of aesthetic knowledge, especially visual ways of thinking and communicating. Specifically, this new research direction extends the critical conversation about new genre public art into the emerging genres of interdisciplinary writing and research dissemination linked to artistic inquiry (see, for example, Bazerman and Paradis, 1991; Becher, 1989; Barton and Hamilton, 1998;

Messer-Davidow et al., 1993). Based on my experience as a participant observer working with the two CURAs, I continue to maintain that the inclusion of visual artists, their practices, and works in interdisciplinary research provides a vital area of investigation. Given the renewed interest in the role of artist--researchers in universities – following the team-based approach employed in the sciences – the prospect of humanities and social science research teams including artists as co-researchers presents us with new, largely unexamined, models of collaborative research and writing (see Blackstone, 2002; Shanken, 2005). Similarly, our community research experience in linking practising artists with community partners from all walks of city life has given us a rich and varied sense of the potential for university-based artist-researchers to help redefine traditional definitions of research and, in the process, influence community and cultural change.

In essence, we have become even more interested in discovering how this 'artists-as-researchers' model extends and complicates the practice of interdisciplinary research and collaborative scholarly communication in the humanities and social sciences. Accordingly, we also need to position university--based artistic research in relation to the public art models of community engagement that gained currency in the 1980s and 1990s. Take, for example, Suzanne Lacy's statement on public art's potential emphasis on community engagement and social and political action – communicated with reference to an "aesthetic language" and discourse of advocacy that distinguishes it from the research interests and inflections of the academy:

> For the past three or so decades visual artists of varying backgrounds and perspectives have been working in a manner that resembles political and social activity but is distinguished by its aesthetic sensibility. Dealing with some of the most profound issues of our time – toxic waste, race relations, homelessness, aging, gang warfare, and cultural identity – a group of visual artists has developed distinct models for an art whose public strategies of engagement are an important part of its aesthetic language. The source of these artworks' structure is not exclusively visual or political information, but rather an internal necessity perceived by the artist in collaboration with his or her audience.

> We might describe this as "new genre public art," to distinguish it in both form and intention from what has been called "public art" – a term used for the past twenty-five years to describe sculpture and installation sited in public spaces. Unlike much of what has heretofore been called public art, new genre public art –

visual art that uses both traditional and nontraditional media to communicate and interact with a broad and diversified audience about issues directly relevant to their lives – is based on engagement. (p. 19)

The underlying motivation here is populist, committed to social action and offered in the service of a community that may have little direct interest in either art or research. As Diane Rothenberg (1988) explains,

> Lacy's populism extends to her coworkers; she includes as significant participants people for whom artworks have little interest and makes available a menu of goals and rewards from which they can choose the reason for their ongoing involvement in her project. Her success in attracting and keeping participants over long periods of time testifies to the relevance of her concerns in the social sphere, to her skills at social organization, and to her ability to make pieces which are accessible. She addresses the issue of the alienation of the avant--garde by advocating social change in a form that broadens the audience for art statements. (p. 62)

Similarly, our shared community research experience in linking practising artists with community partners from all walks of city life has given us a rich and varied sense of the potential for university-based artist-researchers to help redefine traditional definitions of research and, in the process, influence community and cultural change (Garrett-Petts and Nash, 2005). Based on our research group's field observations to date (see Garrett-Petts and Nash, 2005, 2009; Nash and Garrett-Petts, 2007), we argue that the presence of artists as co-researchers (and, hence, co-writers and co-presenters) may introduce a creative destabilization of disciplinary assumptions, prompting the research teams to frame new questions, negotiate and redefine key concepts and a shared conceptual language, give enhanced attention to visual data, and communicate results differently, often offering opportunities for the exhibition or display of both data and findings.

Interdisciplinary research involving visual artists gives contemporary urgency to Marshall McLuhan's (1994) notion that it is "the artist's job to try to *dislocate* older media into postures that permit attention to the new" (p. 254). This dislocation and the resultant alternative academic discourse introduces issues of aesthetic presentation, a rhetoric of visual and verbal display; it also involves issues of knowledge production, the need to accommodate alternative traditions of inquiry, modes of invention that permit increased

attention to personal experience, and a hands-on ('qualitative') exploration of material culture (see Dewey, 1934, 1938; Ecker, 1963). While I stop short of McLuhan's (1960) assertion that "we must all become creative artists in order to cope with even the banalities of daily life" (p. xiv), I argue that a focus on the writing, speaking, and research practices of visual artists should be a prerequisite to understanding the "sensuous geography" (Rodaway, 1994) of this new visual/verbal interface (the emerging alternative discourse of collaborative and interdisciplinary inquiry).

Certainly arts-based research is not new – and social scientists in particular have shown themselves more than ready to theorize a merging of the critical with the creative, as Carol Mullen writes in her introduction to a special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry*:

> An explosion in arts-based inquiry has recently occurred in the social sciences, forcing open its tightly stitched seams. This experimentation beyond scientific modes of discourse has created hybrid forms – notably performance art pedagogy ... Creative forms of research representation – narrative, life history, poetry, drama, visual art, and more – have come to the fore, eliciting response, luring participation, and demanding attention. (p. 166)

In an earlier issue of the same journal, in an essay entitled "The Arts and Narrative Research – Art as Inquiry: An Epilogue," Shelley Day Sclater (2003) asserts: "we are witnessing not only the possibility for recognition of new knowledges that have hitherto been bypassed or excluded, but also the tentative mapping out of a new terrain for research in which the boundaries and possibilities of 'narrative' itself are challenged" (p. 622). Sclater writes of artistic inquiry as "an embodied social practice" (p. 622).

These descriptions of artistic inquiries raise the kind of questions that are beginning to give shape to the role and significance of artistic research in the academy – what Piantanida et al. (2003) call "sculpting the contours" (p. 182) of a developing field: If research, traditionally defined, promises the creation of new knowledge, what kind of knowledge does artistic inquiry produce? What effect might an emphasis on artistic inquiry have on the production of art? How does the increasing academic and institutional recognition of artistic research affect the artistic community? How does the practice of artistic research affect academic culture? What is the role of artistic research in animating communities? What can non-artists and communities, including academics and academic communities, learn from artist-researchers – in terms of developing

alternative methodologies, attitudes, and patterns of inquiry? And, a question seldom asked in the social sciences literature: what are the implications of integrating not just creative forms and activities, but more fully the discourse (the disciplinary assumptions, practices, traditions, and values) of artists, art historians, critics, and curators?

I want to linger a moment over this last question, for it has become a commonplace in the literature on 'arts-based inquiry' to focus on *creativity* and *artistic ways of knowing* in the abstract, as a group of approaches and possibilities that may be unproblematically imported into – usually as supplements to – normal research practices. Helen Simons and Brendan McCormack, for example, write in a recent article on "Integrating Arts-Based Inquiry in Evaluation Methodology":

> Released from the categories, codes, and formal processes of analysis that are common to more traditional forms of evaluation, we can be open to new ways of seeing and understanding. In using the creative arts we are challenged to engage differently with the data and to see differently. (2007: 295)

The authors repeatedly reference the "creative arts," "artistic knowing," and "the creative process" as liberating strategies, but little is said about the categories, codes, and formal processes that inform the particular work of the individual practising artists who represent, enact, and embody artistic knowing.



Figure 5. The *Produce/Produce* project (September-October 2009) combined an art exhibition, conference, and print publication, with the aim of fostering community discussion and action regarding food security, health, Aboriginal perspectives on plant cultivation, and community gardening. Within a year following the project, local citizens developed a community garden in the city's downtown core. For details of current activities, see http://publicproduceproject.blogspot.ca.

**What the CURA's artists and non-artists say about their collaborations**
*The research approach*
Now that we are nearing the end of our ten-year CURA, and as part of a self--reflective study, we've been gathering and studying research narratives from 30 members of our group (university researchers, artist-researchers, community research partners, student research assistants, university administrators, and support staff working on the project). The members were interviewed by student research assistant Bonnie Klohn and asked a series of questions about their experiences as CURA participants, including questions about the nature and value of artistic inquiry.

*The understandings and misunderstandings*
When asked about feeling part of the research team, the artist-researchers responded positively, situating their activities as part of an engaging and potentially transformative interdisciplinary conversation, a conversation many felt comfortable entering and exiting without compromising individual artistic practice:

> *Coming to terms with interdisciplinary research:*
>
> "It's momentary. When I'm there [working with the research team] it can immediately be rekindled again. It's perfect..."
>
> "It's very interesting for me to be able to interact with a variety of people who weren't necessarily in the arts."
>
> "What the CURA has done well is helped develop these interdisciplinary and collaborative research connections. ... I think we have been very open to the idea of working inter-institutionally and inter-collaboratively and inter-disciplinarily, and internationally as well."
>
> "I haven't focused my projects as well as I did in the first CURA, and perhaps it's been trying to understand the framework of the quality of life aspect of it – which has always been a little bit more of a sociological model. As a practising artist, I have to push myself to be interested in that [topic]."
>
> *New audiences and insights:*
>
> "The small cities exhibition – Urban Insights – in 2005, which was one of the culminating dissemination events for the first CURA, brought numerous researchers, their students, and community partners who were involved in

projects … into the Kamloops Art Gallery. … That brought a huge influx of people into the Gallery, people who would not have otherwise gone there. I think it might have been [the Gallery's] largest attendance for an event."

"[The CURA] has been a place where you can always expect people not only from a broad range of places, but a broad range of thinking and different academic practices – so that you are always kind of collaborating with people who are completely outside of your own discipline, and that's pretty rare actually in academe. We tend to silo everything."

"CURA has changed my artwork. It has made me focus upon the land, on a sense of place."

When asked to elaborate on the process of artistic collaboration and inquiry, the artist-researchers tended to reference public and institutional spaces, positioning their practice in relation to both the university and the gallery. The potential for surprise, personal change, and the initiation or education of others characterized their responses:

*The sense of surprise and exploration:*

"There is room for surprise."

"It gives rise to surprise."

"I think it is wonderful, … wonderful too that it is *an inquiry*, not set, not rigid."

*Bridging and aligning disciplinary practices:*

"The challenge … is figuring out how people from different disciplines think and work and what the trajectories of their research are."

"I think that the most positive aspects for me, as an artist, was the fact that there was very little intervention in what I wanted to do artistically. That is, I could get an idea and run with it and develop it right to the end, without anyone micromanaging my project…. Another positive aspect: bringing people together … from diverse fields to talk about one specific thing. These are people you wouldn't normally come into contact with."

"Allows interactions with either government or economic entities… Artists see their practice as broader …than [something] market-driven or quality-driven – but as exploratory. [This is] a tendency that has existed since the sixties among many artists who have been [working out of] a political interest."

"As a practising artist my primary mode of dissemination is exhibitions. ... So the co-authoring of books steps outside the usual kind of paradigm of visual arts dissemination."

"If I step back to ten years ago, to the beginning of the CURA, I would not have thought of myself as an artist ... doing public art or art in public spaces. ... It is an interest for me now."

"It brings people into galleries, which is a very good thing."

Several respondents offered comments on the theory and implications of the emerging artist-as-researcher model:

*Toward new models of knowledge production:*

"In every discipline you have some kind of applied area. ... So the artists are very clearly held to the applied area, even though everybody knows by now that they have opinions ... and can write and speak. But the theory is still owned by the theorist or by the art historians. [This] theory is about objects, ... about how to take care of these objects and even how to evaluate them. But I think that artists need a theory about *making*. [The emerging field of] artist research is beginning to talk about that."

"CURA is out in front in understanding the research value of the creative imagination."

"It is no longer a matter of the artist locked away in the studio and only having their art seen by curators – but more an opening up of the studio doors to the community. To give to the project and what the artists can give to the community, and it works like a two-way street."

Perhaps most significantly, when asked about how other members of the research team or how members of the general public tended to see their collaborative contributions, the artist-researchers assumed a ready appreciation of their role as central to the program, focusing on issues of creativity (invoking both the clichés and the capacities) and areas of presumed shared interest:

*Creative practice as central to research:*

"I think I was a key player in terms of having a strong cultural presence, specifically a visual arts presence, in the CURA. That flowed throughout the first CURA and was important in obtaining the second CURA."

"I know the rhetoric: the artists have resources of creativity they can share – but it's not as easy as that. Mainly because creativity is largely mythical and undefined… As artists work alongside others … something self-reflective can be explored. … It's about a way of serving and interacting with the world."

"I think it's really smart and progressive. Creative imagination and that kind of artistic practice is central to [the] transition we are making from literacy to [new forms of literacy]. In other words, this kind of creative act needs to become much more central to education generally."

"What I have seen develop through the involvement of the faculty and student artist-researchers has been an interest among faculty in other departments, in terms of what visual arts and visual and performing arts practice can bring to research. [For example,] faculty members in geography, who I see as taking a leading role in the CURA recently, have had significant involvement with the visual arts faculty: … they are cognizant of what we do and very interested in what we do – and vice versa. We see a meeting point of our disciplines, and what we both deal with is very physical material, whether it ranges from a small object to a complete landscape. Hence the shared interest in visual imaging through such cross-over forms as maps, diagrams, etc."

"Artist-researchers are the adhesive between those domains [the university and the community], … [the] spark and catalysts. We are accessible and permeable."

Early in this chapter I invoked the work of Jonathan Metzger (2011) and Alex Michalos and P. Maurine Kahlke (2008), whose research collectively speaks to both the potential and the limitations of recognizing art's value in the public sphere. Metzger laments the "generally patchy" critical consideration of how



Figure 6. More traditional conferences (regional, national, and international) were the hallmark of the Community–University Alliance. *Map My Culture: Community and Space in Small Cities* (Comox Valley, May 2009) was organized by a community partner and featured academic presentations, an art exhibition, field trips, and an online journal publication. For more on these activities, see http://smallcities.tru.ca/index.php/cura/issue/view/3.

collaborations between artists and planners might work; while Michalos and Kahlke find that the public seems reluctant to recognize the arts and artists as central to perceived quality of life. But, as I was recently reminded by one of the social scientists working on our team, such results are only surprising to those already immersed in or committed to the arts and culture scene. In this light, then, perhaps we should not be surprised to find that many of the values and assumptions expressed by the artist-researchers are not fully shared by other members of our research group.

### *How non-artists viewed the contributions of artists*

Of those non-artists interviewed, the administrators expressed the most support for the role of artistic inquiry in a community–university research alliance, seeing the artist-researchers as exemplars of interdisciplinarity. One senior administrator commented:

> I think that artist-researchers are an incredibly important contribution to what our divisional research would be because I do remember the times when artists were not considered to be researchers. That's not too long ago. Over the last twenty years I've seen a very positive shift towards a more inclusive definition of research, and I believe artists themselves can contribute immensely to our understanding of the world and community issues.

Calling artistic inquiry "an intriguing type of research," the administrator noted that "artists ... or artistic research ... can uncover aspects of (in this case) small city or community life and history that you couldn't really depict in the same form [using] traditional research means." Speaking of the CURA more generally, the administrator identified the interdisciplinary practices as "a tremendous asset," arguing that "it's the way to go. I don't think there is a way back to the old very disciplined kind of research – very confined and narrow. If you really want to find real answers and really discover what we are really about, we need to do that together in teams."

A second administrator echoed this sentiment, noting:

> having artist-researchers in residence at TRU has given them a stable situation from which they can do cutting-edge work that they may not have been able to do if they were independent artists in the community. So I think the ability to work from that academic foundation [is important], where they can come back to the academy and reflect on what they've learned in the community, but mutually

go back out into the community and share what they are learning through that reflection. ... They are not at the periphery of what's gone on. I may be overstating the case, but I think the CURA again has enabled people to see the impact of the arts from all different levels.

In contrast, fellow faculty researchers and the community research partners – though sympathetic to and welcoming the collaboration of the artists – expressed only passing interest in artistic inquiry as a potentially transformative mode of research. Although uniformly complimentary, and using adjectives like "fantastic," "creative," and "wonderful," many of the faculty researchers reported only "casual talk" with the artist-researchers and little direct involvement. In general, artistic inquiry was only lightly theorized outside the artist-researcher group itself, although the artists' work was enthusiastically praised for its public visibility, for making the research more accessible, and for providing what one researcher called a "kind of lubricant for the process." The informants' phrasing, too, is instructive: the faculty researchers and their community partners spoke of "*bringing in* artists" and how artists offer "a really interesting opportunity for *bridging or moving* what we do here." These are metaphors of separation and connection that, while ostensibly employed to espouse the virtues of collaboration, nonetheless highlight a continuing disciplinary divide. The following digest of comments is typical of the responses recorded:

*A disciplinary divide:*

"I think that the artist-researchers have played a really instrumental role in this research. I think there is an accessibility of the visual that there isn't of the written. It's visible, right?"

"I loved having the artists as part of it. I thought it was incredibly valuable – looking at the artistic representations and the work that they did."

"Well it's different, it's much more qualitative, although I would consider myself a qualitative researcher much of the time. There's a focus on displaying data, art gallery exhibits, which is not common in the social sciences. So there's a kind of a ... that is, because the artists tend to outnumber the non-artists [working on the CURA team], there tends to be, or at least this is my perception, ... a lot of exhibits. And I've learned a lot from that, although that's not the way I would exhibit my work."

"I think it's been an interesting exercise, but I think in the long term it's important to go back to one zone area for publishing work. And conversely, invite artists over to publish in a more traditional, social science domain, which involves conferences rather than exhibitions."

"I'm a guy with sort of a science and technical background, so what struck me was the sort of cultural/artistic creative element of the research that sometimes took me out of my comfort level, but I appreciated it very much."

"Well, I think that to me, and to the agency that I represent, I think that whole cultural and artistic area of community research has been given credibility and a sort of standing."

"People don't often think of art as research, but yet I think there's so much more awareness created [for our agency's work] when you can showcase the artistic element ... of any research, right?"



Figure 7. The *Tranquille Art Project* began as a community exhibition initiative, with contributions from university researchers and artists. Following on the heels of the 2007 project, CURA researchers engaged in a detailed study of Tranquille, an historical site situated at the rural/urban fringe of the city. Researchers continue to develop a public archive, teaching tools, and an audio walking tour to further animate the space with narratives of local history, exploration, and environmental sustainability.

## Conclusion

The presence of artists working alongside social scientists and humanists invites the engagement of artistic research as a complex of attitudes, motives, and actions. I would want to maintain, based upon over ten years of observations, that the presence of artists affects positively the nature of the research questions posed, the methods employed, the results validated – and the means of disseminating those results. But, even among members of an interdisciplinary research group committed to artistic research as a privileged mode of inquiry, a fulsome and shared recognition and understanding of the roles art and artists play in both academic research and community animation is evidently no easy

goal to achieve. What we can say for now is that any creative destabilization of disciplinary assumptions observed was likely a transient effect and largely project-specific: while we certainly documented research teams framing new questions and negotiating concepts and methodologies as part of their research activities, the lasting impact may reside more with our artist-researchers and administrative support than with the non-artists (that is, than with fellow faculty and the community research partners).

The artistic animation of research spaces, inside and outside of universities, remains a matter of ongoing inquiry. We are in the early stages of understanding the nature of artistic research and what can be gained by integrating artist-researchers in labs, businesses, corporations, factories, not-for-profit organizations, economic incubators, policy institutes, hospitals, community planning councils, and community–university alliances. This understanding begins with intentional recognition – with an informed awareness of artistic practice as a bona fide research approach; with more case studies, especially those where artists are working in collaboration with other artists or with interdisciplinary teams; and with more development and testing of new models for interdisciplinary research collaboration involving artists and their inquiry practices.[4]

**Notes**

research partner Rachel Nash passed away from cancer; and although she was unable to contribute directly to this essay, her insights (drawn from years of conversations and collaborative writing) nonetheless inform many aspects of the work presented here.

2. Eight years ago, in a chapter published in *The Small Cities Book* (2005), John Bratton and I considered how smaller communities might become incubators of creativity and innovation. We explored the critical mass of cultural activity necessary to attract and sustain a community of knowledge-based investors and professionals; we wanted to know how the creative capital of small cities measures up against that of their larger neighbours. We concluded that the existence of a critical cluster of artists and cultural activity in a small city not only acts as a magnet for attracting investment in knowledge-based ventures and for recruiting and retaining knowledge workers, but it also increases the capacity for sustained engagement in work-based informal learning and innovation. Smaller places are acknowledged typically for nurturing both community involvement and an enhanced quality of life – qualities we were initially surprised to learn have been negatively associated with creativity. According to the existing literature on large urban centres, the opportunity to establish strong community ties may actually deter some people (read: the creative class) from moving to small communities: deep community involvement is said to be commonly rejected or avoided by itinerant knowledge-sector workers, who characteristically prize personal flexibility and opportunity over community responsibility and commitment.

3. Gilles Viaud's work on a quality of life 'tool kit' for small cities provides an example of the kind of scale-specific measures much needed by smaller communities (see Viaud et al., 2009).

4. Although the literature on the role of artists working in research teams is slim, a number of key studies stand out: Shanken (2005); Scott (2006); Pearce et al. (2003); Wilson (2001); and Thompson (1995).

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