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Abstract: This 1+2 text offers work of two doctoral art education doctoral students at Concordia University, presented in a kind of collage with the reflection by the course instructor of the graduate seminar on Art as Research and Research as Art in which this work was generated. The author discusses the specific Canadian and institutional contexts of these projects of 'research creation', describing this formulation for material thinking as in use in her country and as explored through Canada's nascent doctoral programs in studio arts. Further, she suggests how these and further works of doctoral students Natasha Reid and Danut Zbarcea may contribute to local and larger conversations on the roles of art and text in material thinking and what her own perspective on these issues might be.

Key words: Research creation, reflective practice, art, research, situated practice, context of making

Research creation as material thinking: Reflecting on the context of making of projects by two doctoral students at Concordia University, Montreal, Canada

All material thinking being from a particular embodied standpoint – being 'situated', to use a familiar term of feminist theory (Harding, 1991; Haraway, 2003) – I introduce here work of two doctoral students from our specific Canadian and institutional locations. My introductory remarks will contextualize their projects within the Canadian concept of 'research creation' (our version of 'material thinking') and within our country's post-secondary culture of doctoral studio practice. I'll address how the artworks/articles by Natasha Reid and Danut Zbarcea began their lives within a graduate course that I designed and led in the fall of 2008, and will also touch upon my own orientations as an artist, writer, educator and now Assistant Professor of Art Education at Concordia University in Montreal. I venture some observations on Zbarcea's and Reid's visual and verbal work, but – as the reader shall see – since my own orientation is towards multi-modal *collage* in which juxtaposition is minimally rationalized, I invite enjoyment of these articles without over-interpretation through my own lens. However, I do think it important to share how this work came to be.

Here in Canada, 'research creation' is a working concept of our universities and funding bodies such as the federal Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and Quebec's provincial Fonds québécois de la recherche sur la société et culture (FQRSC). We consider research creation to be "any research activity or approach to research that forms an essential part of a creative process or artistic discipline and that directly fosters the creation of literary/artistic works. The research must address clear research questions, offer theoretical contextualization within the

relevant field or fields of literary/artistic inquiry, and present a well-considered methodological approach. Both the research and the resulting literary/artistic works must meet peer standards of excellence and be suitable for publication, public performance or viewing" (SSHRC, 2009b).

At the national level, this concept of 'research creation' has been understood institutionally at least since the turn of this millennium. Then, SSHRC, the federal funder of university-based research by faculty and graduate students, decided to launch a pilot program to fund artists' research within post-secondary institutions – a response to the growing numbers of artists conducting research in tertiary education and their relative lack of success in securing traditional research grants (SSHRC, 2009a; SSHRC, 2007, 2). SSHRC has since held four research creation competitions and has awarded funding to 124 projects (headed by solo or team artist/researchers), each of which can receive up to C\$250,000 over a period of three years. Regrettably, the future of such federal funding is now uncertain and the 2008 competition may be the last. (Of course, there are political aspects to this shift, with the federal Conservative government's 2009 budget calling for cuts to SSHRC grants and a reorientation of graduate student funding to business-related research.)

Thankfully, within Quebec, our provincial government continues its funding for 'chercheurs-créateurs' or researcher-creators (FQRSC, 2008), with the annual fall competition recently having closed and next year's foreseen by those of us working in this jurisdiction. Even though overall the total number of grants is smaller than SSHRC's and the amount of available funding smaller, importantly for the professional development of artist/researchers within this province, FQRSC has a special tier of competition for new artist/researchers in the first seven years of their career: in 2008, two of the 10 FQRSC-funded research creation projects were proposed by new researchers (FQRSC, 2009). Being in the early years of my own career, and working with other new artist-researchers still in doctoral and master's programs, I appreciate the graduated learning that such a tiering enables.

In fact, in Canada we are still developing a consciousness of research-creation within our post-secondary institutions, as well as the programs that enable graduate students to explore and advance its theories and practices. At Concordia University, we have a world-renowned Faculty of Fine Arts, but no doctoral degree in Studio Arts as such; here, individuals wishing to bring arts practice/material thinking to their doctoral studies can pursue a PhD in Art Education (within the Faculty of Fine Arts) or a PhD in Humanities (through the Centre for Interdisciplinary Studies in Society and Culture), both of which enable a creative project as the heart of a dissertation. In fact, the PhD in Studio Arts is new to English-speaking Canada, where two such programs have recently gotten underway. [1]

As an artist-researcher whose visual practice has long been at the core of my work, I am determined to enhance the consciousness of practice-based research within the Department of Art Education at Concordia University and to boost the quotient of material thinking that happens within our advanced graduate degree. While our Master's thesis projects often reside in intertwined exhibitions and texts, we have yet to see a PhD dissertation that is centered in visual practice. Since my own doctoral research did so (Vaughan, 2006), I am hoping to encourage like-minded students in my own department to take this same plunge. Designing and leading the Fall 2008 graduate seminar in Art as Research and Research as Art was an first step in this direction, requiring as I did that students consider North American and international interdisciplinary works that link and separate art and research (via, for instance,

texts such as Finley and Knowles, 1995; Fox & Geichman, 2001; Knowles and Cole, 2008; Knowles, Luciani, Cole, & Neilsen, 2007; Piantanida, McMahon, & Garman, 2003; and Watrin, 1999). Students were also offered the opportunity to create a culminating assignment that embodied their thinking in material/textual projects. Two doctoral students made this choice: Natasha Reid and Danut Zbarcea. It is the reworking of their very different class assignments into article form that is presented here.

Zbarcea's "The disenchanting of the desensitized digital image as artistic and educational visual strategy" was sparked – he tells the tale – by the contrast between his early morning experiences past and present. Zbarcea recalls the full-body, sensual experiences of his out-of-doors, earth-connected childhood dawns in Romania with the more exclusively visual way his current days kickstart: inside his home, with computer boot-up and the world it brings to him. Linked to Zbarcea's shock at the completely unselfconscious images of violence and its attributes that he finds on Flickr, his article recounts his own retaliatory project of visual art making. As images, Zbarcea's works are digital composites that juxtapose prototypical children's drawings with decoupage images from Flickr, but with complicated ethics, since each of his component pairs is as [in]authentic as the other. Zbarcea's text was created as a way of communicating the antecedents to this making, identifying the humanist learning base (Krishnamurti, Jung, Abdallah as-Ansari, Sontag) that informs his perspective, and implying an art education project that he will implement with secondary school students. Thus, "The Disenchanting of the desensitizing visual image" begins in visuality and is completed and extended through language – a teleology that can perhaps be attributed to the fact that Zbarcea is an accomplished visual artist, with numerous important exhibitions in his native Romania and now in Canada, where he also works as an art educator and scholar.

By contrast, Reid's "Creatures of comfort: Installation as reflective practice" was initiated, as she recounts here, by her own writing: writing out a sense-rich imagined morning ritual in her ideal office of the future as a museum educator. This exercise of active imagination (Jung, 1997) or reflective practice (Kincheloe, 2005) in turn prompted the creation of a visual installation that invoked Reid's own training as a visual artist. Her-site specific installation links comfort, memories and play, and in turn prompted and was supported by the theoretically oriented artist's statement here. As Reid herself writes, "Both the written work and the visual work told stories. These stories supported each other, deepening each other's meaning—the textual strengthening the material and the material strengthening the textual." Through the text that verbally elaborates the project's purposes, Reid's work makes links to contemporary art practice through installations by artists such as Tracey Emin, Rita, and Do Ho Suh, a reflection of her own professional orientation to postmodern arts as displayed through traditional and unconventional cultural institutions.

Obviously, in selecting these two pieces for inclusion in this issue of *Studies in Material Thinking*, I indicate that I very much like each project individually (and, I should also mention that Zbarcea and Reid have each won a fiercely competitive SSHRC doctoral fellowship for their doctoral research). In different ways, Zbarcea and Reid engage with both visual/spatial realities and language as creative matter to be wrought, considering that the 'work' of the work resides in the helix-like integration of multiple modes of researching and representing. Within their texts as within their artworks, each author/artist's voice is heard, distinctive, personal, accomplished. Together, I find that both projects felicitously and inclusively present a spectrum of possibility for material thinking, often in this part of the world called

'arts-based research' (Sullivan, 2006). Seen side-by-side, Reid's and Zbarcea's works exemplify inclusive and diverse possible ways of working the arts and research together: encompassing digital realities, visual culture, and contemporary high art practices and museology; European/continental-style thinking/writing and a personalized, down-to-earth version of North American-style academeze; affirmative almost neo-romantic belief in the value of the arts and post-postmodernist disenchantment and questioning, to name a few. Together, these projects indicate how two of our best students are engaging in practices of material thinking through image, object, and language and so moving forward our understanding of these forms' integration in both art and research.

The juxtaposition of Reid and Zbarcea's pieces also reflects my own orientation, which is towards collage as creative process and research practice (Vaughan, 2005). Collage as I construe it is an original composition in any media that brings together previously independent components. Each of my own scholarly/creative projects is a collage in which the problem or research question is engaged through multiple forms, often visual, digital, and verbal. For me, there is no hierarchy or sequentiality of forms, rather, an interdependence and mutuality (perhaps a reflection of my multiple professional activities in writing, broadcasting, and visual arts). Such was the paradigm I established in my own PhD dissertation (Vaughan, 2006), completed as the first multi-modal doctoral project in the interdisciplinary Faculty of Education at York University in Toronto, Canada – undertaken at a time when no English Canadian PhDs in visual arts had yet been established. The collage of my dissertation encompasses a variety of *visual* forms (drawings, textiles, photographs, sculpture); a variety of *textual* forms (personal, observational, historical, methodological and theoretical content, interwoven throughout the illustrated dissertation text); an array of *representational* forms (visual, textual, time-based digital work); and an assortment of disciplines (human geography; urban theory; environmental and arts education; visual practice; memoir; research methodology). But of course there are myriad ways that material thinking may inhabit dissertation work.

Speaking of PhD dissertations, those undertakings still lie ahead for both Reid and Zbarcea, who are currently progressing through the PhD program in the Department of Art Education within the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia. Currently, as a doctoral student Zbarcea works towards his comprehensive exams, then his dissertation proposal and of course the final project itself, which I suspect will be an extension of the research creation project presented here. Having passed her comps, Reid is now considered a doctoral candidate and works on her dissertation proposal. As a member of her committee, I know that she is considering a version of arts-based research that will allow her to embody data in images/objects of her own creation while emphasizing text-based museum educators' narratives. I very much hope and expect that their continuing doctoral work will engage issues of art and research/research creation/material thinking in ways that move forward our collective engagement with those practices in this particularly Canadian context of ours.

In terms of this context, then, I complete my articulations on Reid and Zbarcea's work in particular and research-creation in general not in the meditative early morning that inspired their memories and reveries, but in the excited staccato rhythms of Halloween, October 31st's ritualized evening of festival, mock spookiness and neighbourly exchange. Here, as soon as night falls, children in costumes go door-to-door, soliciting candy and admiration for their creative disguises. I sit with my laptop at the table near the front door and work in short spurts between bell

rings. My thoughts are punctuated by visits from small, serious demons and bejeweled young princesses, well-mannered Supermen and fully-gearred hockey players, face-painted lady bugs and 'blood'-soaked vampires, usually accompanied by adults in costume and the occasional dog. I dole out chocolate, taffy kisses, sugar candies, and suckers and exclaim in mock terror and delight. Contemporary kitsch, perhaps, but reflecting a more sober underlying reality: this festival that has its roots in welcome, honour and appeasement of returning spirits and beating back the fall's encroaching dark, is perhaps an apt image for the work of research creation. In both, we wrestle with tradition and innovation, share ideas and possibilities, enjoy pageantry and tomfoolery, get duped by pretty baubles and entranced by genuine charm, and aim to extend the perimeters of our understanding while still recognizing the inevitable shadows and mysteries that veil our material thinking.

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Endnotes

[1] Two English language universities have recently begun offering studio-oriented doctoral degrees: in Toronto, York University's Faculty of Fine Arts has welcomed students into the PhD in Visual Arts program since September 2008 (http://futurestudents.yorku.ca/graduate/programs/Visual_Arts/); the University of Western Ontario in London, Ontario, has since September 2007 been offering a PhD in Art and Visual Culture with two streams, New Media, Sound and the Moving Image and Collecting, Curating, and Museum Histories and Practices (http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/grad_students/programs.html). In French-speaking Canada, the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) has since 1997 been offering an interdisciplinary doctorate in the arts (D.E.P. ARTS or Doctorat en études et pratiques des arts, encompassing performing and visual arts as well as design with an emphasis on practice and exhibition (http://www.unites.uqam.ca/doctorat_arts/).

Of course, beyond the logistical specifics of doctoral programs, their development and growth raises broader questions about the sociology of education and the arts that I will not dig into here. I suspect that our English-Canadian context is similar to that of the US, where doctoral degrees in visual practice are highly political. For more on this point, see James Elkins' new edited volume, *Artists with PhDs: On the new doctoral degree in studio art* (New York: New Academia Press, 2009).

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