

Experiments in Art Research

How Do We Live Questions Through Art?

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What is this book? It is not an instruction manual. It's a place to meet people interested in living questions through art¹. It's an invitation to take your own practices for a walk, as you take yourself for a walk, your eyes and nose and hands, and see who you see, who you resonate with. It's a celebration of works in progress.

How did this book happen? Through an interweaving of moments, and practices, and people.

Fifteen minutes into our Fall 2021 graduate seminar, Curriculum Development in Art, someone asked about a rubric. How were assignments to be graded? Sarah paused and answered, "I don't have an answer. So often in the classroom we're taught to pretend that we understand everything, that we're separate from everything and in control. Coming back to our in-person class, I'm tired of pretending so much." As we discussed the possibilities of not pretending so much, I (Azlan) felt something unknot a little in my heart—a pulled-tight-ness loosening toward joy. Two years later I'm part of a community grounded in moments like that.

There was a moment in that class where the graduate students showed me (Sarah) that it was okay to do something a little risky. Natalia Espinel (who appears in this book) invited us to try a kind of inquiry that was grounded in sharing weight as a form of sharing connection and insight. The exercise had one person literally laying on top of another. As an instructor, I was worried about the physical contact, about someone finding it inappropriate (especially during the COVID-19 pandemic). But Natalia invited us in with confidence and caring. Azlan accepted the invitation. Their moment of shared weight opened our class to further inquiries that included more embodiment than

scholarship often does. Two people's willingness invited us—not just toward Natalia's exercise, but to all sorts of new forms.

The first time I (Catalina) stepped into a doctoral class in art education, I found Jorge with a pile of books spread across tables asking students to pick the titles we wanted to read in class. The last day of that semester we had a public symposium to share our final projects, and Jorge made quesadillas for everyone. "What is happening?" I asked myself. I thought I was not allowed to do and be like that in a PhD program. That was Jorge's first permission. After that experience and meeting amazing colleagues who always think-with-art, (like Angela Baldus, also in this volume), I learned that there is always another—more liberatory—angle to engage with scholarship. In my second semester in the program, in Sarah's class, she opened the space for us to respond to readings creatively. During our study of curriculum as a complicated conversation, I responded by inviting my peers to consider the complicated and educational experience of being in proximity, without the possibility of just "letting go" and recognizing that tension in your body and the need to communicate. In that space, I offered a paper cup telephone—which I called "The Entangler"—as the medium to hold our class discussion. Jorge and Sarah later encouraged and supported a public version of having complicated conversations through "The Entangler," as a performance, at a social gathering for a major academic conference. Again, I thought we were not allowed to do, and be, that, as scholars. But, as this volume clearly manifests, we are allowed!! The interweaving of practices and networks of support that have flourished through permission-giving in art scholarship has opened a door for me, and all of us, to think, learn and be, exactly as we need to.

Near the end of Catalina's PhD defense, I (Jorge) asked the committee if I could say a few words. I think I was trying to say thank you and maybe even how much I enjoyed traveling alongside her on this trek, but what I ended up saying—and crying about—was how impressed I was with the path she made for herself. A path that was now ready to be retread, responded to, and invoked by a wave of creative practitioners (many of them in this book, myself included) who just needed a few permissions to rethink what it might mean to enact a scholarly and creative practice in and around art and its education. It was like we had found—or maybe fabricated—a key that let us cross thresholds many told us we couldn't traverse. And now we were on the other side. And on this side, there was an entire world to be discovered.

In moments like these we find a kind of permission to experiment in a plurality of ways of being (which are grounded in ways of knowing; or perhaps it's the other way around). These permissions seed and grow into a plurality of sensorially rich experiences and relationships. By living questions through art, we mean engaging in an aliveness that is responsive and part of larger ecologies. We *live questions through art*—visual, auditory, performed, conceptual, pedagogical—as if we are seedlings pressing up through nutritive

soil. Living questions through art is one way to engage with what is and what isn't and what might be.

Scholarship and research in the academy have taken an arts-based turn. This is still relatively new, even though the arts-based-turn—perhaps—is already in its third generation. In the brief history of research conducted adjacent to (and through) the arts, there is a trend toward clusters of scholars and artists forming around various programs and institutions. For example, one major root is the teaching and mentorship of Elliot Eisner at Stanford University with renowned arts-based scholars like Richard Siegesmund, Liora Bresler, Charles Garoian, Kimberly Powell, and others branching out from those nascent ideas. Shortly after these scholars began to establish themselves, another major root grew strong at the University of British Columbia with the advent of *a/r/t/ography*. Rita Irwin's leadership supports a wide community of scholars, including Stephanie Springgay, Nadine Kalin, Daniel T. Barney, Kit Grauer, Juan Carlos Castro, and many others. Each root is perhaps more clearly a root system, as Stephanie Springgay is also part of the current emergence of *research-creation* scholarship, along with other scholar-artists like Erin Manning, Sarah Truman, and Natalie Loveless. These communities—these root systems—give life to the arts as a methodological mode for research and experience.

We're not suggesting that the histories or genealogies are simple or linear. They're not. We're also not implying that they're fixed and unalterable, or that we must express any fidelity toward them. But we do find communities of like-minded scholars coming together to grow around shared concepts. One of those growth sites for the art communities of this book is Jorge Lucero's concept of *permissions*.

Permissions are nothing more than an expansion of the imagination—in some ways modeled after the premise that drives the more conventional gesture of the literature or textual review conducted by formal scholars and other creative practitioners. Thinking about permissions is a way to think about what is possible, even if the ultimate aim isn't to do anything with those permissions. It's a posture, if you will, where the works, methods, and perspectives of other practitioners open up pathways for new or reconfigured attitudes, curiosities, experiences, experiments, and pedagogies. If someone creates a sculpture that is a walk, we now know that a sculpture that is a walk *is possible*. Permissions allow us (all the contributors to this book) to test the pliability of anything that manifests a materiality, and that's every thing: physical, conceptual, and maybe even cosmic. The authors of this book take permissions from artists, scholars, teachers, activists, game designers, friends, lovers, and just about anyone who dedicates themselves to testing the pliability of their reality in order to reimagine and speculate that teachers are conceptual artists, that giving attention to things is scholarship, that the inarticulable is just as much knowledge as the things that can be spoken or written, that daily gestures of breathing and walking and dancing and touching

and speaking and writing are all sophisticated forms of scholarly practice, meaning a way of living our questions.

As we saw how these questions were alive in our community, we imagined this book project to take a snapshot of some of the projects currently underway. We also realized that *our community* is an interlocking assemblage: on a small scale, a graduate seminar doesn't involve just the people in the room, as each of us brings insights from our friends, mentors, other colleagues, and so on. Expanding outward, each of us is a living part of multiple communities, and the groups who started imagining this book are as much a part of art relationships in Colombia and Finland (to pick two) as in the United States. To reflect how the experiments in this book arose from lived relationships, we created a structure that shows "connection stories" between authors. We also created a structure whereby contributors could invite a "companion piece" into the book. These structures are an incomplete gesture toward the layered vitality of overlapping practice that this book celebrates.

The book is organized into three sections, and ordered in ways that draw out connections between the different projects. The sections important similarities (and differences). At the same time, the order and sections could have been different. You don't need to read "cover to cover." There is no one path through this. Dip into what you're drawn to.

This book takes a particular, situated approach to exploring the entanglement of art, inquiries, lives, and communities. Instead of discussing what research through art "is," we ground into practice, sharing what a community of active scholars are currently *doing* inside art research. This is a tapestry of vibrant work happening here and now. In addition to the individual projects, we hope to highlight and celebrate the way that projects unfold inside networks of living relationships. We draw from each other, cat-sit for each other, scream together on certain dark nights, and give each other rides to the airport.

This book is not an instruction manual of how to do art research. We don't believe in Best Practices, when too many of such Practices are used to shore up a hierarchy of haves and have-nots—those who Know, and the rest of us who learn from them. We believe we all know (and don't know). We see questions lived through art all around us. By moving beyond concretized definitions, we intend this as a meeting place where active art researchers share themselves and practical examples of their work. Welcome.

Note

- 1 We acknowledge other uses of the concept of "living questions" including the invitation by Rainer Maria Rilke (2011) in *Letters to a Young Poet* to "living our questions" and the entreaty toward "living the questions themselves" in "Apophatic Inquiry: Living the Questions Themselves" by Merel Visse, Finn Thorbjørn Hansen, and Carlo J. W. Leget (2020).

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