

# ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

INQUIRY  
IN  
THE  
VISUAL  
ARTS

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## CHAPTER 5

# ARTIST AS THEORIST

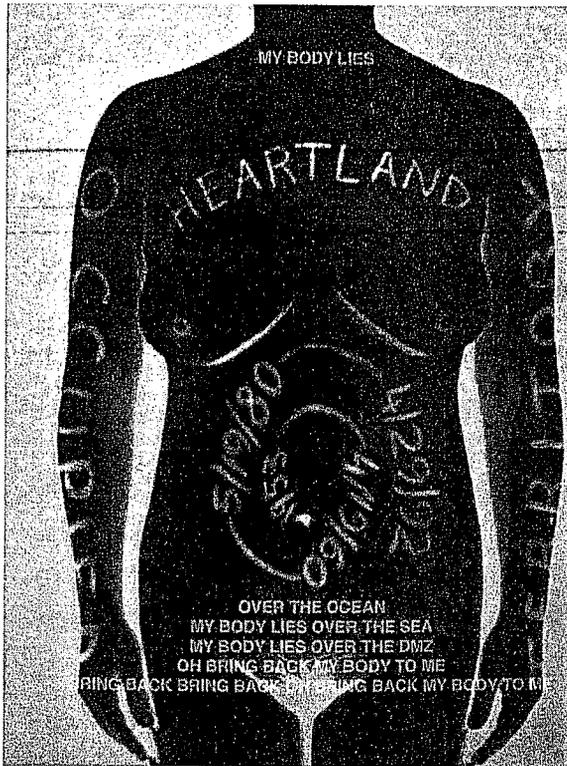
In an interview in 1979, Christo was asked by C. Y. Chang (1982) about the relative importance given to the *process* of planning large-scale, site-specific art projects, and the final product. His reflective response was that the emphasis was not so much on process and product, but on “process and the *progress*” (emphasis added, p. 200). The long period from the initial conception of the idea, through the endless negotiation among many agencies and individuals and the final realization of site-specific projects is a creative and educational enterprise that has, according to Christo and Jeanne-Claude, many outcomes. For the many persons involved, either as participants or observers, the process can indeed lead to progress as attitudes change, views broaden, and awareness is awakened. This pattern of planning, reviewing, adapting, managing, analyzing, and revealing is characteristic of the transformative nature of visual arts research. This attitude and practice is also reflected in the art of the late Chen Zhen, the prominent contemporary Chinese artist whose work is characteristic of those who move between and among cultures as their art reveals connections and opens ruptures in how we think about who we are. Melissa Chiu describes the art of Chen Zhen this way:

Although Chen left a great legacy in his artwork when he died in 2000, another legacy was his concept of “transexperience,” a notion he developed for his own art practice, but one that can be applied to a more general consideration of diaspora. According to Chen, transexperience “summarizes vividly and profoundly the complex life experiences of leaving one’s native place and going from one place to another in one’s

life.” This condition, characterized by in-betweenness, has similarities to many other descriptions of the diaspora, but the departure from convention lies in the way that Chen considered transexperience as a creative catalyst. On an individual level, transexperience allowed Chen to incorporate his Chinese training and experience into his work without resorting to a dichotomous relationship between China and the West. On a broader level, Chen’s concept facilitates a more sophisticated conception of the diaspora that accounts for the present and future as much as the past embodied in the homeland. (2003, p. 33)

The expanding landscape of imaginative and critical inquiry pursued by artists, cultural commentators, and teachers is purpose driven, where the need to explore new domains for creating and critiquing knowledge is being taken up by the challenge of personal belief and public need. This process is being shaped in part by artists who see structures that define traditional discipline areas not as boundaries or barriers, but as potential pathways that can link ideas and actions in new braided ways. To examine these practices in more detail, this chapter examines changing patterns and sites of visual arts inquiry and the rich tableau of issues and ideas that is often held within the complexity and simplicity of visual images.

What is apparent is the reemergence of artist-theorists as important sources of vision and voice within the cultural politics of these times, and the approaches they use that require different ways of thinking about artistic inquiry. Three themes capture this dynamic move within the visual arts. In keeping with the strategy used in previous chapters, the breadth and depth of artistic practices is shown to extend from a focus on the artist-as-theorist to encompass constituent practices more clearly identified with empiricist, interpretive, and critical traditions. I argue that the inherent eclectic nature of the visual arts means that constituent theories and practices are regularly embraced and reworked toward all manner of different purposes as artists explore creative practices that I identify as *Making in Systems*, *Making in Communities*, and *Making in Cultures*. Practices that might be defined within the area of *Making in Systems* are complex and exploratory in nature as artists open up new visual forms and structures that are both grounded within discipline knowledge and skills, but also transcend these boundaries to intersect with other domains of inquiry. *Making in Communities* is “reinterpreted” in character and mobilizes the communicative capacity of visual arts to make new connections among individual ideas, public issues, and broader histories. Artists working within the domain of *Making in Cultures* capitalize on the immediacy of a critical art practice and investigate ways of challenging perceptions through visual encounters. These three frameworks



Yong Soon Min, *Defining Moments* (1992). Six-part photographic installation. Body image (left) 1/6, Gwangju image (right) 4/6. 20 x 16 inches. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

of practices are the kind of inquiries that are helping to change the way we think about the visual arts as a site for research and I examine them in more detail later.

To understand the role of the artist as a creator of visual images with the potential to conduct research “in” art in the context of studio practice, there is a need to consider the different functions of the artist and the image as a data source. The idea of the artist as social recluse or a cultural lamplighter of genius is an inadequate representation in this day and age. Nor is it reasonable to accept the image of the artist-teacher as someone whose creative expertise is merely a model to emulate. Contemporary artists adopt many practices that dislodge discipline boundaries, media conventions, and political interests, yet still do so within a realm of aesthetic experience, cultural commentary, and educational relevance. The image of the artist as creator, critic, theorist, teacher, activist, and archivist partly captures the range of art practice today. Many contemporary artists move easily over the terrain of other disciplines as they absorb, adapt, and co-opt a research language. To support her artistic vision, a sense of historical and cultural critique is

achieved by Yong Soon Min in her 1992 photographic installation, *Defining Moments*. Yong Soon Min describes the work this way:

All of the images and dates of *Defining Moments* refer to dates with personal significance that have uncanny connections to important events in Korean and Korean American history. The year 1953 was the year of my birth as well as the year that the Korean War ended. The next date is known in Korean as “Sa-il-gu” or 4/19, the date of the popular uprising in South Korea that overthrew the Syngman Rhee government which I witnessed as a child. This event allowed our family to leave Korea. 5/19/80 refers to the Gwangju uprising and massacre, an important turning point in Korean history that served as a catalyst in my growing interest in current Korean history. The last date, “sa-i-gu” or 4/29 refers to the LA riots, which also happens to be my birthday. (Cited in Hwa Young Choi Caruso, 2004, p. 201)

## ● SITES OF PRACTICE

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Three areas of visual arts practice are described in this section: *Making in Systems*, *Making in Communities*, and *Making in Cultures* (see Figure 5.1). New settings and situations such as those opened up by digital environments, community spaces, and cultural collaborations are creating new places for creative and critical inquiry that require alternative forms of research and scholarship. Research about contemporary art practice that includes direct contact with artists and their work reveals how artworks can be seen as “sites of possibility” for making art, thinking about art, and teaching art. Artists and others explore these spaces and places in ways that disrupt assumed boundaries. By investigating the potential for knowledge creation that exists *between* theory and practice, and *beyond* assumed discipline boundaries, artists pursue issues and ideas that have personal and public relevance. In examining the components of these practices, I use examples drawn from contemporary art that help reflect the breadth and depth of what artists do.

For artists working within the general area designated *Making in Systems* there is a desire to move beyond discipline boundaries and into areas of inquiry that interact and intersect and require new ways to conceptualize forms and structures. For instance, artist-theorists working at the interface of art and science within the digital environment are finding that past notions of theory and practice no longer serve as adequate systems around which to define plans and actions. As such, concepts of collaboration are grounded less on notions of expert systems that divide up roles in terms

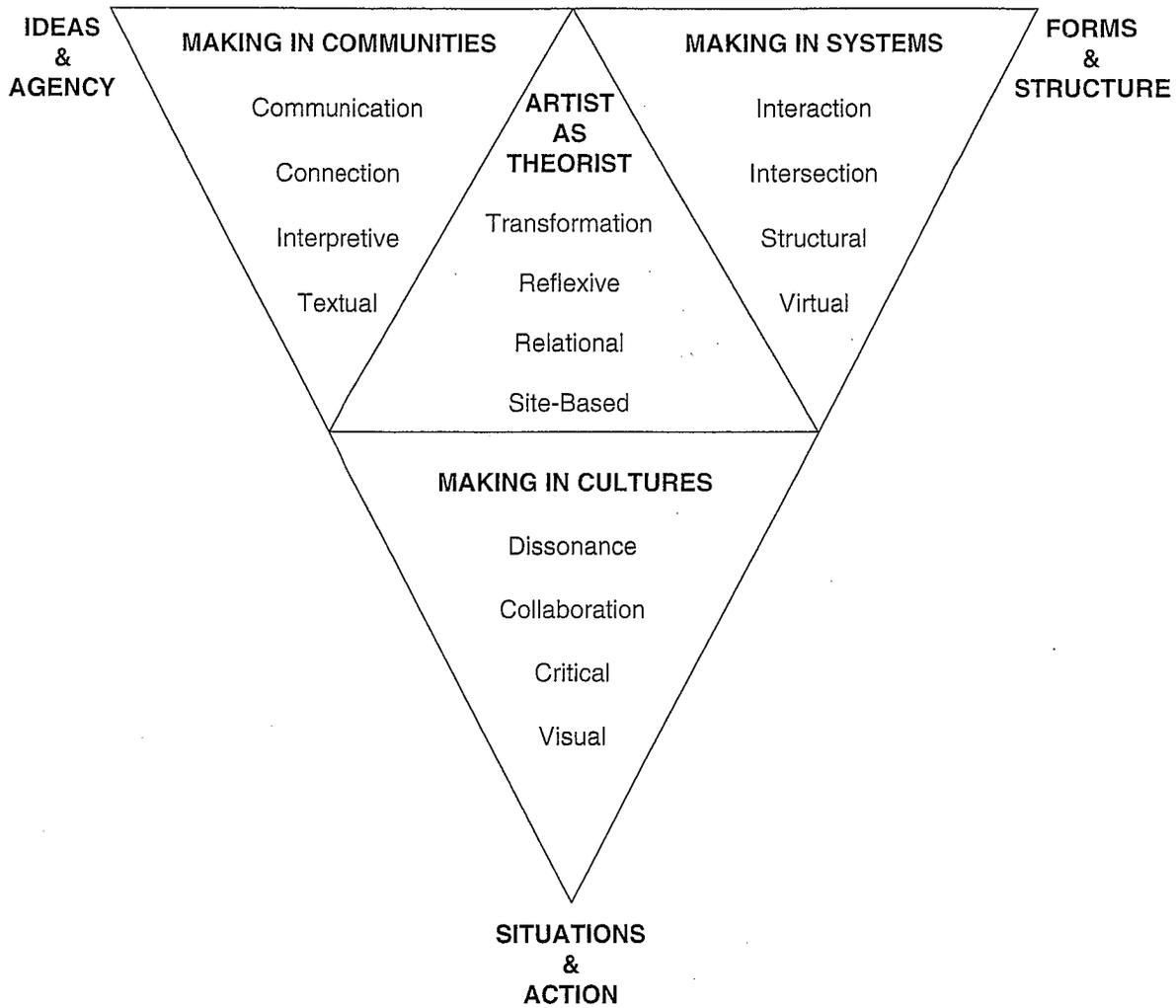


Figure 5.1 Framework of Visual Arts Practice

of ends and means, or design and delivery, but more like a shared wonder that requires new ways of thinking about visual and virtual systems of inquiry.<sup>1</sup> *Making in Communities* might be seen to incorporate the visual arts practice of those artists working within the orbit of community-based art practice who look to dislodge restrictive paradigms of thought. For instance, indigenous art practice can be considered in this way, as Western conceptions of the art object or the scientific method of inquiry cannot be expected to accommodate the interlacing nature of experience and understanding that is at the heart of indigenous knowing.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, those contemporary artists whose practice might be seen to encompass the broad area of *Making in Cultures* use their hybrid experiences growing up and working across countries and cultures as a basis for their imaginative and intellectual experiences. Examples might be artist-theorists working from a

cultural reference located within Asia and the Middle East who provide insightful images that “talk back” within the cultural diaspora in ways that open up new dialogue and dislodge old myths.<sup>3</sup>

### Making in Systems

The underlying premise here is that art making is a systemslike practice because it exists within a broad set of private and public relationships. This does not deny the intensely personal function of the visual arts, or the wider corpus of social processes and purposes. In thinking about systems, I describe two main types because this suits my purpose here. There are *static* or *closed* systems, and there are *dynamic* or *open* systems. The difference is in the relationship with the environment where static systems are independent of external influence, while dynamic systems are constantly changed by interactions with the surroundings. Static systems are somewhat mechanical, have useful heuristic value, and may be used to describe what something is (e.g., a system for printing photograms); they may be prescriptive structures that designate causes and effects (e.g., making clay pots and firing them in a kiln); or they may be predictive systems that are explanations and theories about how and why something is likely to work (e.g., using the conventions of perspective to show the illusion of space). Dynamic systems, on the other hand, are transformative. By this I mean that as a consequence of continual interactions among the elements in a system and among features of the environment, things change. And in this exchange, the feedback from both the surrounding influences, and the features of the system, produce effects that are new and different.<sup>4</sup> These outcomes are more than merely a result of the “sum of the parts” because from these transactions new phenomena are realized—much in the way that J. M. W. Turner’s scientific knowledge of the properties of paint pigments became something quite different when this was transformed by his understanding of the aesthetic qualities of what oil paint could do.

This is known as “emergence” and describes how new features emerge from an interaction that is independent of any of the parts themselves. This also highlights the nonlinear character of dynamic systems. By nonlinear I refer to the way that simple cause-and-effect relationships are *not* involved because there is no direct connection between the input and the outcome. A linear relationship is different; it indicates that there is a proportional association between a cause and an effect (e.g., if you increase the amount of water added to watercolor pigment you get a related increase in transparency). Because dynamic systems are nonlinear, a small influence or action can cause myriad outcomes on any scale. Dynamic systems and emergence

are components of complex adaptive systems (CAS) that are in a continual state of interactive change. And CAS are found at all levels of our natural and human worlds. In a way, a CAS can be seen to provide a braided frame within which artists create ordered forms from chaotic schemata in a transcognitive encounter with their surroundings. Murray Gell-Mann (2003) sees the interactions among the artist, artwork, viewer, and historical context as being a meeting of the minds and circumstances in a complex adaptive process of exchange and development.

In the case of the individual work, the regularities can be described by embedding it in a conceptual ensemble. For the oeuvre or the work of the school, we may describe the regularities by embedding the whole series of pieces in a conceptual ensemble of series. Throughout, we are considering the artist as a CAS, the school or movement as a loose aggregation of complex adaptive systems functioning more or less as a CAS, and the viewer as a CAS learning about the art in question. (p. 57)

What is crucial about the dynamic systems described by Gell-Mann and others (Coveney & Highfield, 1995; Eve, Horsfall, & Lee, 1997) is the interactive nature of these artistic components and processes. The area of visual arts practice where this kind of complexity is most apparent is at the intersection of art, science, and technology, where artists are exploring the digital world. After all, as a site, the Internet is like installation art and only “comes alive” when someone interacts with it. Valovic (2000) describes cyberspace as “part technology, part human interaction” that is shaped by the mutual interaction of digital systems and human systems whereby the Internet “does not do anything in the absence of the human mind—in fact, the human mind is the sole source of its viability” (p. 39). This element of interactivity changes the relationship between the artist-creator of digital forms and the viewer-participant because there is no longer a direct line from the image to its public reception; in fact, the artwork, as a physical object need no longer exist. And just as there are many choices the artist can make in forming and presenting a digitally encoded image, the viewer can also determine how, where, and when to engage with it. Margot Lovejoy (1997) describes interactivity as a primary feature of digitally based visual arts that “is a flexible, nonlinear interactive system or structure, one designed and coded with linking capabilities which allow the viewer to make choices in moving along different paths through the work” (p. 165). She adds that

with interactivity, readers, viewers, listeners can pass through the boundaries of the work to enter it. This puts them in a position to gain

direct access to an aspect of authoring and shaping the final outcome of a work in a way that never before existed before the advent of the computer. The artist gives up total control in favor of a new kind of viewer communication and experience, one which offers a less passive position for the viewer, one which also celebrates the inherent creative capacities of all individuals. Interactivity offers important new avenues for cognition to take place, where works can begin to flow with the more psychological internal associations of the individual viewer's make-up and identity in mind. (p. 166)

This new form of representation created in the digital setting is no longer a mechanical reproduction copied from an original in the manner described by Walter Benjamin (1968). Rather, it is a simulation that exists as a codified program of numbers that in many circumstances can be re-created in any version or form desired. In addition, the digital image often may include sound and text, thereby increasing the capacity to embody experience, carry information, and offer up new understanding in a dynamic, interactive way. This is somewhat different from an art object produced within the tradition of studio-practice, which can be "surrounded" by relevant contextual details such as biographical data, evidence of production, related research, and the like, for this is static testament that supports the artwork. Therefore artist-researchers working within the digital domain are opening up more varied opportunities to explore the capacity of visual images to be created and critiqued as sources of new knowledge and understanding.

Artistic practice undertaken in a digital environment is giving rise to research that is no longer challenged by questions about the human condition but is challenged by the need to revise what it is to be human. Information is more than an "object" from which knowledge is gleaned; it is a space where meaning is negotiated within the dynamics of changing contexts. This changes the way we think about inquiry and takes into account the point of view of the researcher and the researched. Cyberspace is radically altering these notions of individuality as modernist conceptions of identity grounded in traditional psychological perspectives are being replaced by a reflexive and decentered sense of self. Sherry Turkle (1995) refers to the many windows we use on the computer screen as a metaphor that reflects our capacity to seamlessly operate within several contexts at the same time. She adds that "as a user, you are attentive to only one of the windows on your screen at any given moment, but in a sense you are a presence in all of them at all times . . . your identity on the computer is the sum of your distributed presence" (p. 13).

The response of artists to the social implications raised by these questions about human engagement with new technologies is yielding innovative

inquiries and adventurous projects. A comprehensive account is given by Stephen Wilson (2002) who presents a detailed review of more than 250 international artists working in various collaborations with scientists on technologies connected to areas of biology, the physical sciences, mathematics, telecommunications, digital systems, and other emergent fields of research. It is the development of newer technologies sparked by the digital revolution that is forging links between the arts and the sciences. According to Wilson, common interests and distinctive methods are bringing artists and scientists together within technological settings where they are able to exercise initiative and maintain independent responsibility. Within this context, Wilson describes research as a cultural activity where outcomes are seen in terms of human exchange and development and as such are not the province of particular domains, or privileged methods of inquiry. For artists, the conceptual cues come from discourse in critical theory and cultural studies because it is debates about society, visual culture, and technology that raise important issues, and investigating these often requires a collaborative response. For scientists, established parameters and methods of inquiry are proving inadequate in dealing conceptually and imaginatively with the possibilities opening up with the new technologies, and in doing so, they are having to address questions being raised by cultural theorists. What Wilson does in his opus is to organize his survey of the many research initiatives being undertaken by highlighting the uneasy but fruitful convergence of methods and practices within a divergent framework of issues and ideas. For Wilson, the arts are crucial to this enterprise because they "can fill a critical role as an independent zone of research, in which artists integrate critical commentary with high-level knowledge and participation in the worlds of science and technology" (p. 35).

The challenge of participating in innovative research that draws its imaginative focus from the visual arts, and its intellectual locus from intersections of science and technology, requires the artist to take on a more clearly identified public role. This is true also for other kinds of visual arts practice that might be described under the generic banner of making in systems. Even a radical historical incursion such as Dadaist performance can be seen to rely on a kind of systemic, critical vision that was enacted within a small, but nonetheless public, network. Threads of this form of arts infusion can be tracked to present-day performance art that quite readily places itself amidst literary, visual, and theatrical technologies where conditions of the private and public self are probed, processed, and repositioned. Mostly occurring in public spaces, the compression of content into a performed text disrupts any stable meaning and relocates it within the language of the production, the dynamics of the action, or the minds of the audience. Installation artists seek a somewhat similar dynamic where the artistic intent tilts toward the viewer

as environments, sites, situations, and events become interactive spaces and systems of reference, inference, and meaning (Reiss, 1999).

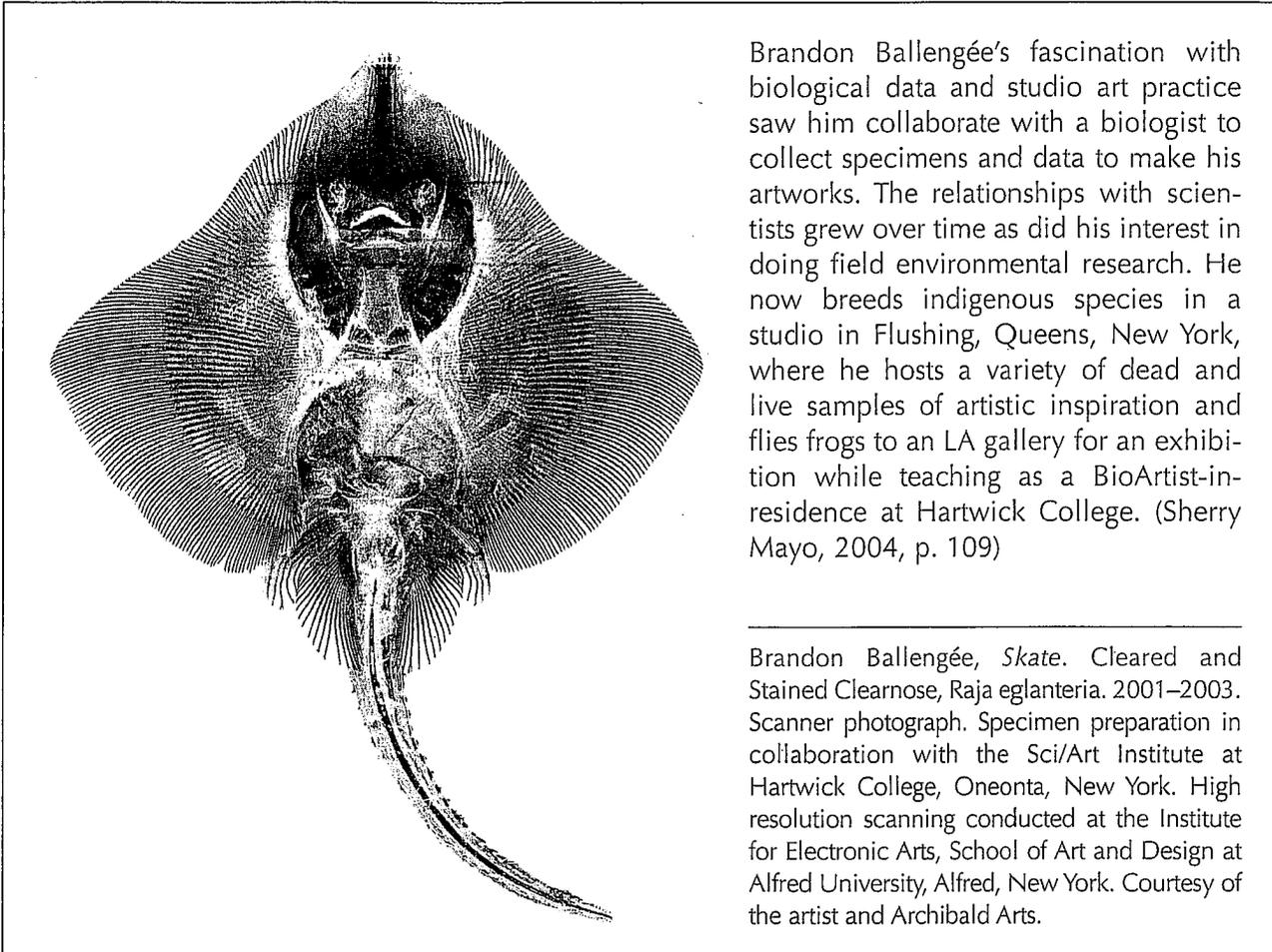
Just as visual artists today feel more open to locating their practice within systems of inquiry and collaborative structures, so, too, do art historians and cultural theorists who see the image as less of a form yoked to mainstream histories, and more of a case or a genre in a broader class of visual information. James Elkins (1999), for instance, reconfigures the history of images as an inclusive system that considers fine art images and nonart pictorial forms as carriers of informative, as well as expressive, content, and therefore of interest to all. His proposal creates a sort of braided history of images that cannot be categorized within the formal traditions of art history, yet creates its own system of connections, dislocations, and legacies of expressive meanings.

Instead of preserving the differences between the histories of art, science, and mathematics and studying the “science of art” or the “art of science,” we should perhaps acknowledge that in the end many divisions between kinds of images are untenable, and that it is possible to begin writing the history of images rather than that of art. Images are found in the history of art but also in the histories of writing, mathematics, biology, engineering, physics, chemistry, and art history itself. (p. 46)

Arguing for a similar rehabilitation of the image as a visual source of knowledge with its own rich history, Stafford (1994, 1996) presents a rationale for the “*intelligence* of sight” based on the notion that “imaging, ranging from high art to popular illusions, remains the richest, most fascinating modality for configuring and conveying ideas” (emphasis in the original, p. 4).

The renewed interest in the role of art making and the studying of images within collaborative systems of research, cultural inquiry, and historical critique is also opening up new ways of thinking about teaching the visual arts. Although visual arts teaching in higher education has an ambivalent heritage as a practice, it requires the capacity of personal vision and the conviction of a public voice. As a process, teaching gains from both institutional system support and the distinctive character of the discipline. So it is not difficult to consider how pedagogical practice might be configured around fresh ideas that align with the emerging innovations underway as artists and cultural theorists look to forge new relationships across domains of inquiry.<sup>5</sup> Although the status of teaching as a practice within the visual arts has been caricatured in the past as intrusive or irrelevant, artists taking on pedagogical roles as a natural part of their art practice characterize some of the most radical and innovative periods of art history.

Despite the ambivalent climate surrounding the research and teaching practice of artists today, the opportunity to reconstruct an image of the “artist-as-researcher-teacher” is at hand. Today, contemporary artists work in



Brandon Ballengée's fascination with biological data and studio art practice saw him collaborate with a biologist to collect specimens and data to make his artworks. The relationships with scientists grew over time as did his interest in doing field environmental research. He now breeds indigenous species in a studio in Flushing, Queens, New York, where he hosts a variety of dead and live samples of artistic inspiration and flies frogs to an LA gallery for an exhibition while teaching as a BioArtist-in-residence at Hartwick College. (Sherry Mayo, 2004, p. 109)

Brandon Ballengée, *Skate*. Cleared and Stained Clearnose, *Raja eglanteria*. 2001–2003. Scanner photograph. Specimen preparation in collaboration with the Sci/Art Institute at Hartwick College, Oneonta, New York. High resolution scanning conducted at the Institute for Electronic Arts, School of Art and Design at Alfred University, Alfred, New York. Courtesy of the artist and Archibald Arts.

and across many of the domains that originally fell neatly within categories of the life sciences, the physical sciences, the humanities, the fine arts, and institutional teaching, and this is opening up exciting possibilities for the field. New York artist Brandon Ballengée explains that

this is something that is growing, there are more scientists that are perhaps learning more about communicating through the arts . . . and vice versa, there are more artists that are pushing the boundaries of different art practices particularly with technology. I consider myself more of a hybrid than a studio artist . . . it's about keeping open and asking questions in both realms. (cited in Mayo, 2004, p. 101)

## Making in Communities

If those artists whose practice is mostly circumscribed by *making in systems* are involved in reconfiguring artistic representation from visual forms to other coded forms, those whose practice entails *making in communities*

accept that forms of representation exist in what Fred Myers calls “intercultural space” (2002, p. 6). What he means is that artworks produced within a community, and used to communicate and connect with others, do so in ways that are multiple, mutual, and where meaning is continually negotiated according to various perspectives, practices, and positions of power. Therefore, as carriers of meanings, artworks are not objects whose messages are melded within the forms themselves, or entirely embedded in the circumstances of how art is made, or overruled by others who read between the lines of their own design. Although there are more dynamics at work that register the right of others to make a claim on what an artwork might mean, the transactions do not take place in a cultural void. Even if privileged readings can be located and confirmed within particular sources and structures, these can also be easily usurped or misrepresented. This intercultural space is a site where cultural representations reside, interpretations are made, and meanings are communicated, but unless everyone is listening there may be just as much “talking past” each other as there might be in “talking back.” These are precisely the circumstances that not only need to be considered, but can also be seen to open up the interpretive space in a culturally responsive way.<sup>6</sup>

There is also something intensely local about knowledge that is grounded in community construction—and local does not mean provincial. The past and the present are never far below the surface, because histories and traditions inform group identity yet do not constrain individual agency. In art making, personal vision and public voice share a loose coalition that not only shapes the dialogue within the community context, but also creates a dialectic with those whose interests are encountered—or so it should be.

There are plenty of cautionary tales of well-intentioned cultural theorists who end up as cultural tourists because they lack an understanding of the interchange between representation, identity politics, and power play. This often results from being blinkered by the authority of discipline interests, or blinded by exotic appeal, and these can lead to superficial encounters and hinder the capacity to see from the position of others. For instance, critiques of disciplines such as anthropology (Clifford, 1988; Marcus & Fischer, 1999) and art history (Harris, 2001; Nochlin, 1988; Pollock, 2001) challenge the way that assumed authority, Eurocentrism, gendered perspectives, and other practices stifle fields of inquiry. In responding to the call for a greater awareness of community in all its complexities, one strategy is to take on the attributes of other disciplines. Hal Foster (1995) highlights this problem with his description of “artist-envy” that he sees in the efforts of some critics of anthropology who seek broader, inclusive forms of cultural representation. Seen in this light, Foster suggests that the artist is naively regarded as “a paragon of formal reflexivity, sensitive to difference and open to chance, a

self-aware reader of culture understood as text” (p. 304). On the other hand, Foster describes a trend in contemporary art that promotes the “artist as ethnographer” as a similar move that caricatures anthropology. Here artists and cultural critics are attracted to the concept of “otherness,” and how meaning is embedded within objects and their contexts.

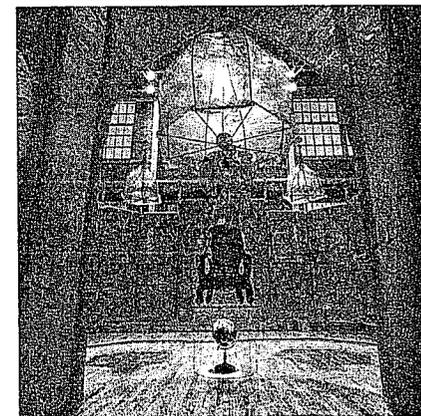
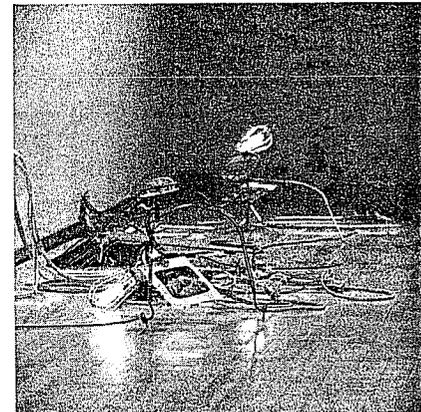
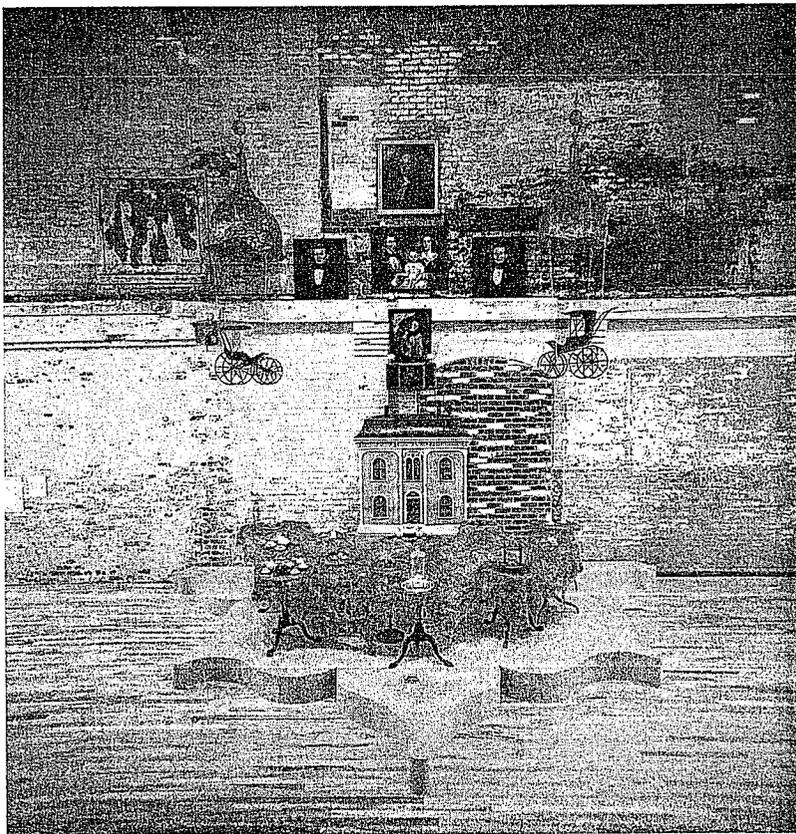
These are features that address many of the concerns raised by post-modernism that parallel the move of artists from the studio into the community, and the viewer from a passive to an active participant in artistic encounters. So it is understandable that artists are attracted to ethnographic practice and communities and cultures as sites of inquiry, and vice versa. But as Foster and others caution, there is a problem where the art produced under the guise of site-specific experience can become a “self-fashioning,” superficial spectacle that lacks the integrity of depth expected from imaginative and disciplined cultural inquiry. According to Dipti Desai (2002), if an artist takes on elements of ethnographic practice as part of a social activist role, then the implication is that perspective, positionality, and power become part of the discourse.

At a time when globalization and technological advances rupture national and cultural boundaries, artists are increasingly called upon to work in different sites across the world. The artist as ethnographer model may be more than a recent trend, given these changes. It is therefore necessary to remember, given the differential access to power in our society and world, that experience can only be understood relationally. (p. 321)

Deepali Dewan’s (2003) description of the art of New Delhi artist Vivan Sundaram suggests that the caution Desai alludes to appears to be taken into account because the multiplicity of theoretical positions is held within the visual dynamic described.

Like a scholar-artist he draws from a range of disciplinary languages, including postcolonial theory, art history, popular culture, history, modernism, postmodernism and photography. However, while Sundaram’s visual language appropriates from these disciplines, it also comments on them, pointing out their implicit logic. . . . The role of Sundaram [in reference to his work *Great Indian Bazaar*, 1999] as a family member is blurred with the role of the artist as curator/archivist. In a self-reflexive gesture, the work calls into question the nature of historical research using state and national archives which uses a finite group of personal objects to reconstruct a larger collective history, suggesting that the products of artists and historians are perhaps more similar than different. (p. 39)

A similar set of informing conditions shapes the art of Rina Banerjee. Within the conscious political questioning of historical myth making and cultural displacement, Banerjee fuses the science of systematic order and the art of contrast. As a result, her installations and objects combine and contradict as familiar materials are put in unfamiliar settings, and foreign forms are refashioned from their fictional past. The exhibition *Yankee Remix*<sup>7</sup> invited participating artists to investigate cultural assumptions associated with the meaning given to historical artifacts and everyday collectibles. Rina Banerjee's sprawling installation is full of specimens of shrink-wrapped mementoes that show quixotic and exotic memories to be an infected vision. The discomfort is in the details as we are reminded how the things we surround ourselves with distort as they display. What is intriguing about the *Yankee Remix* show is the way the artist-theorists and curator-historians shared a goal in critiquing historical perceptions. The artists did what they do best, and created ensembles of visual research that offered arguments, inferences, and insights that invited further questioning.



Rina Banerjee, *Contagious Spaces, Preserving Pinkeye* (2003). Installation of altar, Taj Mahal, and optical sculptures. Commissioned by Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) for *Yankee Remix*. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and MASS MoCA.

The capacity of the visual arts continues to open up new possibilities in ways that reveal insights about problematic practices of the past, and potential directions for the future. In his descriptions of how indigenous artists fashion their own identity construction, Fred Myers (2002) reveals how representation becomes an important “social practice through which indigenous people engage the wider world” (p. 273). In an earlier review of the discourse about the acrylic painting of Central Desert Aboriginal artists shown in 1988 in New York as part of the exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*, Myers (1995) illustrates how art critics, cultural theorists, and anthropologists talk amongst themselves, but not to each other, and in doing so render the voice of the subject mute. In a followup assessment of this event, Myers (2002, pp. 255–276) positions the debates more clearly from the perspective of the indigenous artists in describing the artworks and performances as forms of social practice. Myers describes how the art forms themselves, be they paintings, artifacts, sand paintings, or performances, are best seen as “events” that are a form of social action. Therefore the works cannot be simply positioned as examples tied to the historical past, or set up as easy targets by critical theorists as instances of ideological shaping by the dominant culture. As agencies of social actions, these representations remain firmly authored by the community of artists and are presented to the wider public on *their* terms. Myers raises questions about Aboriginal cultural production that resonate within broader indigenous issues.

The questions that ought to be asked about the politics of current forms of Aboriginal cultural production are whether and to what extent local (community-based) social orders are defining themselves—their meanings, values, and possible identities—autonomously in relation to external powers and processes; whether and how they are transformed in relation to new powers and discourses; and whether or how what had been local meanings are now being defined dialectically (or oppositionally) with respect to discourses available from the larger world. (p. 275)

What is especially noticeable in the work of indigenous artists and researchers in recent years is challenging practices that continue to deny position and voice that can rightfully be claimed to be inclusive.<sup>8</sup> For instance, insights into the significance of *making in communities* and the impact on ideas and agency can be paralleled to the question posed in Chapter 1 about the construction of knowledge being raised by indigenous researchers who ask, “Whose research is it?” As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, this process involves “‘researching back,’ in the same tradition of ‘writing back’ or ‘talking back,’ that characterizes much of the post-colonial or anti-colonial literature” (p. 7). To emphasize the communal ownership of knowledge, Tuhiwai Smith

acknowledges how important it is to ensure “that research reaches the people who have helped make it.” She adds, “two important ways not always addressed by scientific research are to do with ‘reporting back’ to the people and ‘sharing knowledge’ [and] both ways assume a principle of reciprocity and feedback” (p. 15). Tuhiwai Smith makes the further point that sharing information and sharing knowledge are not the same. The former is equated with “pamphlet information,” which gives surface details. Sharing knowledge, on the other hand, does not rely on language framed in certain ways, such as Western conceptual structures; rather, it is contingent on a respect for voice and making the opportunity to listen. A similar distinction can be drawn in discussing the popular phrase “ways of knowing,” which is used as a descriptor to distinguish particular paradigms of thinking that are often associated with different cultural or discipline perspectives. Semali and Kincheloe (1999) make the point that within indigenous communities it is not “knowing” that best characterizes indigenous conceptualizing, but that the value and function of knowledge is best understood as relationships among things. Therefore it is “not as much an expression of knowing as much as it is one of relating” (p. 43). The implication here is that it is not *mastery* of knowledge that is involved in learning but in *relating with* knowledge that is important. This changes the position of how knowledge is created and communicated within communities whereby insider and outsider perspectives become elements within the intercultural space where meaning making occurs. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains this perspective as one that relies on a reflexive approach.

Indigenous research approaches problematize the insider model in different ways because there are multiple ways of both being an insider and an outsider in indigenous contexts. The critical issue with insider research is the constant need for reflexivity. At a general level, insider researchers have to have ways of thinking critically about their processes, their relationships and the quality and richness of their data and analysis. So, too, do outsiders, but the major difference is that insiders have to live with the consequences of their processes on a day-to-day basis for ever more, and so do their families and communities. (p. 137)

There are numerous conceptions of knowledge centered in community-based practices of art making that offer diverse textual references, which communicate to those willing to see and listen.<sup>9</sup> The necessity to be directly involved in creating, claiming, and sharing knowledge is a task undertaken at all levels in indigenous communities and in all forms of representation, and the educational value of these practices hold important lessons for all (Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). As with the hegemonic influence of research,

# ART PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

INQUIRY

IN

THE

VISUAL

ARTS

GRAEME SULLIVAN

TEACHERS COLLEGE, COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY



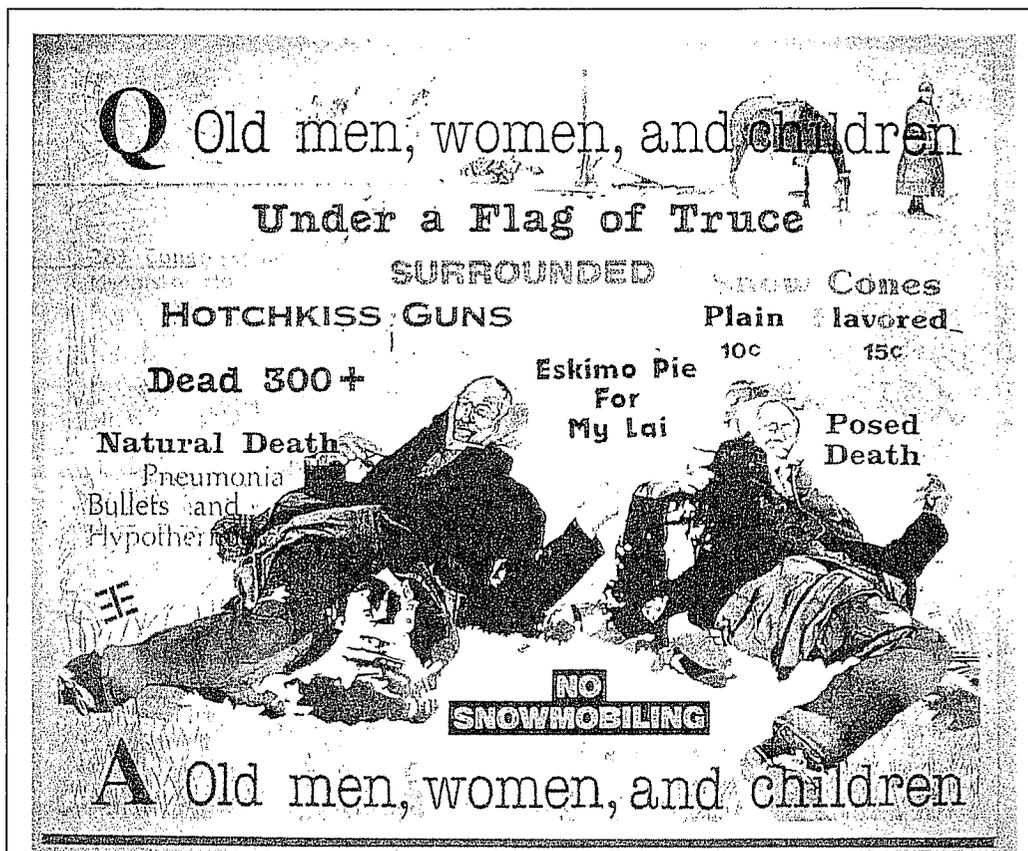
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those who would influence visual arts practice often fail to acknowledge the significance of the aesthetic traditions, communication modes, and cultural structures of communities that exist outside the view of the tastemakers of the artworld, or the gatekeepers of the academy. There are, however, many theorists and practitioners who see the arts as forms that are centered in individual and community practices, yet sway and shift in response to changing social and cultural contexts.<sup>10</sup> Molly McGlennen (Ojibwe), for instance, describes how the artist George Longfish seeks to reclaim cultural knowledge lost as a consequence of historical translation.

Longfish has long asserted that Native people must own their cultural knowledge: "The more we are able to own our religious, spiritual, and survival information, and even language, the less we can be controlled. . . . The greatest lesson we can learn is that we can bring our spirituality and warrior information from the past and use it in the present and see that it still works." This compression of history and present reality subverts linear constructs of time and allows Longfish to reappropriate cultural images and words in order to discern the truth from the lie in a way that has always been innate to Native philosophy and religion. (2004, n.p.)

Invariably these practices include artistic forms that draw on all manner of human expression and take place in a variety of settings as the locus of the aesthetic and educational appeal is now seen to be inclusive and democratic. In keeping with this egalitarian ethic, the methods of inquiry and modes of representation used by the visual arts researcher vary as they can occupy the position of both insider and outsider. This expansive role not only requires the use of artistic forms of inquiry, but can also make good use of narrative structures, oral histories, and "family memory and community recollection" (Bolin, Blandy, & Congdon, 2000, p. 3). When taken beyond the province of education and to the more open setting of the public place, however, community-minded artists often have a hard time dealing with content issues as much as logistics in making their projects happen. Defining the artist as cultural worker is a role that has almost no institutional history with little effort spent on introducing art students to the potential of public projects as a viable form of art practice. Dealing with local histories, communities, bureaucracies, and the demands of collaboration and conflict resolution are not normally part of the studio college curriculum. Plenty of agencies exist to promote public art, and the relatively short contemporary history nonetheless boasts considerable impact as artists and publicly spirited supporters continue to reshape the motivations and methods behind it (Deutsche, 1998; Lacy, 1995). Amongst these pragmatic public projects much



In *Winter Still Life Landscape, South Dakota, 1893*, two images of Chief Big Foot's frozen body mirror one another, with a soldier and a tent in the distance. Phrases framed as questions and answers, "Old men, women, and children," "Dead 300+," "Posed Death," and "No Snowmobiling," appear as text both framing and cutting through the images. To be sure, humor subversively hints at the absurd; more important, however, the text writes through the narrative that the images create by re-asserting a moment of history with truth. As the onlooker is pulled into the narrative, the story of Wounded Knee is turned on its head. Specifically, Longfish's piece defies fixedness by bringing a sense of "orality" to the experience that necessarily demands perpetual invention, with the speaker and listener, the artist and onlooker as mutual partners in the artistic encounter. And within this ever-changing dialogue, within the remembering of a horrific massacre, spirit enables healing. (Molly McGlennen [Ojibwe], 2004. *George Longfish*, February 28–May 23, 2004, *Continuum 12 Artists*. Smithsonian National Museum of the American Indian)

George Longfish, *Winter Still Life Landscape, South Dakota, 1893*. Acrylic on canvas, 79 x 99 inches. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

has been done to expand the kind of research artists undertake, yet the distinctions remain that keep institutional practices, artworld process, and public programs mostly at a distance. Perhaps it is a reconfiguration of

private studio spaces and the public places as collaborative research sites that might help visual arts researchers respond to the challenge identified by Lucy Lippard (1997).

With few exceptions, the art schools and university art departments in this country [America] still teach nineteenth-century notions about the function (or functionlessness) of art. Most art students, even sophisticated ones, know little or nothing about the history of attempts to break down the walls. . . . There are very few programs that offer prolonged, in-depth experience working with communities and other “public” entities. Little has been written on the actual day-by-day, year-by-year processes of making public art—what an artist has to go through to execute the “product,” which is then reviewed in the art press with minimal understanding of the “public” audience’s viewpoint, and in the general press with minimal understanding of the artist’s context, hassles, and intentions. (p. 269)

## Making in Cultures

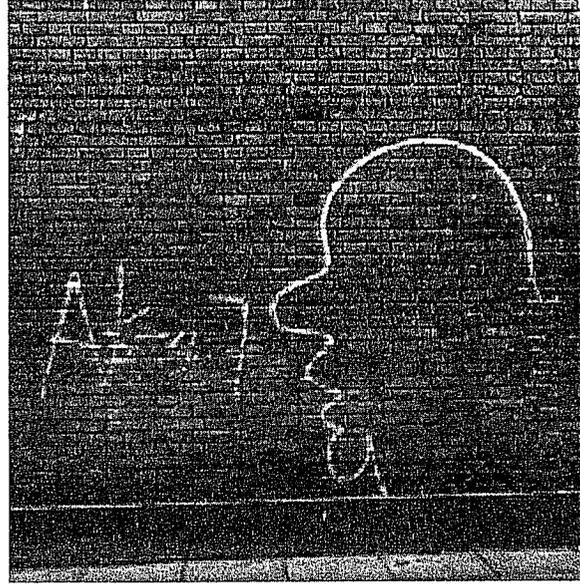
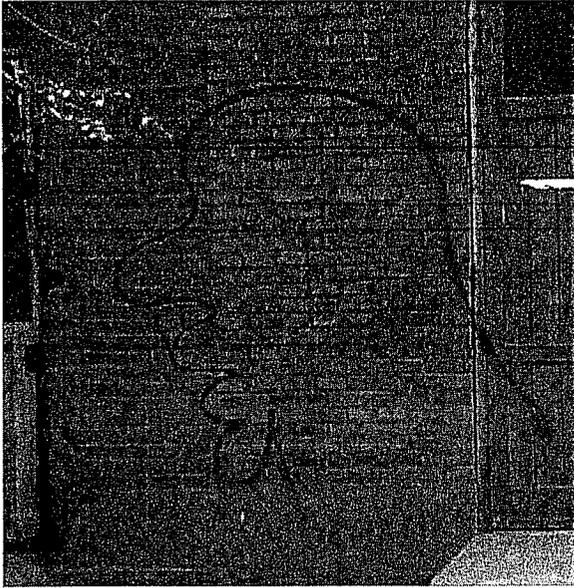
As we have seen, for many artists their practice is mediated by systems of making or systems of community, yet for others it is not a collective context that characterizes their art making, but the way they make use of tools or techniques for particular purposes and pursuits. If we consider postmodernism as one of those periodic shakeups of cultural complacency felt across layers of reified theory, and within levels of restrictive practices, it is not so much new content that supplies the shock as it is new ideas about how to do things. With postmodern discourse mostly dealing in theory rather than practice, what is most revealing are the strategies of thought and lines of inquiry used, as these embody the fresh perspectives from this most recent age of ideas.

During modernist times the prevailing construct was “to *see* is to know.” This was grounded in an empirical understanding based on direct experience and was mostly achieved by participation in the grand tradition of cultural tourism. To visit and observe sites such as archaeological ruins, historical settings, or the physical abundance of historic museums was essential training for the cultural aesthete. Many art students endured the travails of these travels where knowledge was held within the borders of the ubiquitous art slide and was felt as an experience of art in the dark. During postmodern times we live in a mediated visual world where there is little distinction between the real and the virtual. If we understand the constructions that shape what we see, then “to *know* is to see.”<sup>11</sup> Thus there are different ways of knowing and interpreting the world. The critical task is to determine the social impact of these

different visions, and the creative task is to create forms of representation that have the capacity to reveal, critique, and transform what we know. This is characteristic of *making in cultures* as artists who pursue a resistant art practice make full use of the potential of visual images to help reveal critical understandings about issues of human concern. The Chinese artist Zhang Dali uses his distinctive visual signature of a profile of a human head to mark up buildings throughout Beijing slated for demolition in the wake of rapid modernization. Zhang Dali uses two forms of graffiti he describes as *Dialogues* and *Demolitions* as a way to alert citizens about the loss of Chinese cultural identity. Dialogues are outlines spray-painted on walls; whereas Demolitions are chiseled and chipped profiles that cut holes in the walls to reveal traditional or contemporary buildings in the background. These empty images are enigmatic reminders of the human scale that was so prominent in the courtyard communities of Beijing.

The task of the artist-theorist within this cultural context therefore is to investigate how image makers and meaning makers come to know the things they do. Obviously the image-based researcher also creates and interprets visual information so a central consideration is to address the need to be critical in assessing how researchers themselves make meanings. This critical imperative implies that the visual image is more than a product that can be isolated or contextualized. Rather, a different set of theoretical parameters is needed to fully understand the way images reveal insights and understandings. This principle is accepted by art historians and cultural theorists who understand the dynamic, interpretive relationships among the object, creator, viewer, and related cultural, political, and institutional regimes that influence how knowledge is both constructed and made problematic (Bal, 1996; Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Furthermore, the status and meaning of the "visual" undergoes continual change as various means and ends are invoked within the workings of the interpretive communities that surround the visual arts. These discontinuities are evident in the different historical and sociocultural patterns of practice of art writing, art historical inquiry, and curatorial practice.

In considering how art writers and cultural critics respond to traditions and practices of *making in cultures*, it is in relationships rather than images or objects where value is located. It is within the ensemble of art making, interpretive scope, critical perspective, institutional constraints, and cultural influences that meanings are both made manifest and made problematic. In other words, what artists and other communities and collectives create is taken up by art writers and interrogated and repositioned within broader regimes of thought. This cycle of critical analysis continually expands as the robust quality of visual arts can be interpreted with reference to different



Mathieu Borysevicz (1999) describes Zhang Dali's *Dialogue* series this way:

The symbology employed here is figurative; it is the image of a common human denominator, immediately identifiable and therefore highly charged. It is a backdrop that outlines the theater of the street, a shadow cast by China's tremendous population where emergence from the crowd is not only discouraged but is logistically impossible. The image is found in an environment where conformity rules, once through political ideology, but now in the global forces of market and fashion trends. Through its repetition, the head indexes the asphyxiation of individuality in society. Often painted several at a time facing in the same direction, the heads queue up as if to mock the blind herding of the masses. The mass, however, is made of component individuals; they are all originals yet uniform. Likewise, the image is the product of a free hand, not the result of mechanical reproduction; each one is different and yet they are all the same. Zhang Dali's personal story, however, is not the same and these heads attempt, in some way, to narrate that story. (p. 10)

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Zhang Dali. *Dialogues*, Spray-painted buildings, Beijing. Reproduced courtesy of the artist. Photograph by Graeme Sullivan.

aesthetic, social, political, and educational ends. The status of the art image or object is therefore best appreciated if seen to be a cultural practice whose genesis is generative of personal and public meaning when opened up to critical discourse by the art writer.

Within this interpretive space where the visual image is squeezed of new meanings, certain canons are disrupted much in the same way that newer reflexive methods of research show up prescribed practices as unable to cope with the complex realities of today. In her investigations of visual culture, Mieke Bal (1996), for instance, dislodges the idea of causality as it is normally

associated with the study of art history. An artwork is subject to surrounding influences during its making because it is not merely the end result of a series of actions or temporal events, but is continually re-created in the changing circumstances of the present. The contexts that surround our understanding of art can never really exhaust its meaning. A useful way to understand this notion is to compare interpretive meaning to measurement, as it is understood in scientific research. Quantitative researchers know that all measurement, no matter how precise, contains elements of error or chance that cannot be controlled. The best that can be done in an experiment is to assess the probable ratio of results in any intervention to that of error and hope that there is a significant difference. Consequently, there is no certitude to scientific measurement. In an analogical way, Bal and others (Heywood & Sandywell, 1999; Wolff, 1993) acknowledge that similar circumstances surround the interpretation of visual forms, for there is always a residual interpretive space that opens up opportunities for further meaning making. This does not give a license for endless interpretation, for as with any research activity, the information is in the details and the inference is in the plausibility of the evidence.

A useful example of Bal's approach to thinking in a context, and her questioning of the tendency to lock interpretations within structures of the past, is her analysis of the politics of representation evident in the American Museum of Natural History in New York. In developing a rich semiotic critique of the museum and its location within the physical and cultural language of the city, Bal highlights how the presentation of humanity and nature communicates a narrative "of fixation and the denial of time" (Bal, 1996, p. 16). Examples are given such as the positioning of cultures along timelines depicting "man's rise to civilization," and the less-than-seamless juxtaposition of people and things. An example is the categorization of anonymous non-Western peoples alongside the great names of classical antiquity.

The time frame initiated, then, is not that of a causal voyage through time. Transforming temporal tourism into knowledge production, the time frame is that of an evolutionism colluding with taxonomy, dividing human cultures into higher and lower, the ones closest to "ours" being the highest. It would be feasible, although not easy, to walk backwards, to undo the telling of this Eurocentric story, but the museum has not provided panels that make such a reversed story readable. (p. 30)

The critical vision presented in these kinds of deconstructive practices run parallel to broader questioning stances concerning representation from personal perspectives, within particular communities, and across cultural

divides.<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the struggle is private and puzzling, and although the public historical circumstance may offer an image of change, the rhetoric may often be more than the reality. In considering his African American identity from the position of his curatorial practice, Hamza Walker (2001) describes the contradictions that exist as the social lens is more broadly drawn to reveal a breadth of cultural diversity, but the zoom is backward in time rather than forward, so that the view may be wide but the vision is narrow. For bell hooks (1995), being dispossessed of vision and voice makes it all the more necessary to fashion a critical discourse because “if one could make a people lose touch with their capacity to create, lose sight of their will and their power to make art, then the work of subjugation, of colonization, is complete” (p. xv). The outcome is captured in James Rolling’s (2004) evocations of what it is like to be “homeless” and “nameless,” which results from a normalizing process that allows one’s individual and cultural identity to be defined by others. Direct reference to these dilemmas of identity representation is given by Olukemi Ilesanmi’s (2001) commentary on the lyrical, but discomfoting, art of Laylah Ali.

These creatures with large flat heads of color, brown-skinned bodies, and teeth that are hard to ignore as they grin or grimace, ritually make and break allegiances, cut and maim one another, soothe the hurt and make offerings little understood by those of us on the outside of their world. . . . This viewer sees Ali’s allegories of power as parables of race as experienced in America. It can’t be coincidental that her creatures all have brown skin or that lynching and symbols of team sports, basketball especially, recur in the work. The sleep of reason in the United States has produced monsters that continue to haunt our racial imaginary. The black body as featured star in spectacles of violence and betrayal are peculiarly American entertainment as even a cursory trip down our collective memory lane will reveal. (p. 20)

Making in cultures, when seen from the perspective of identity politics and the cultural diaspora, reveals the hybrid practice of artists working within and across geographies. The physical movement of artists between countries and continents positions them strategically to carry out their imaginative and intellectual critiques. Many pursue a practice that often features curatorial collaborations where the various roles of the theorist and the practitioner easily interchange. Yet within these settings, the issue of cultural representation remains paramount where the curatorial task, according to Alice Yang (1998), involves articulating forms of identity that are “not subjugated to the demands of dominant representation” (p. 97). In discussing the problem of

situating contemporary art from China within an exhibition context in the West, Yang sees the task as one that “might free us from the constraints of both the fields of traditional Chinese art history and modern western art criticism, both of which make their claims on Chinese contemporary art, bringing to the enterprise different biases and blinders” (p. 101). Notwithstanding the prevalence of these interpretive constraints, when approached from the perspective of artists, the issues confronted take on board a theoretically profound and culturally rich blend of politics, position, and hybridity. Three short examples drawn from the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art (Webb, 1999) illustrate this point.

### **Making in Cultures: Artists Participating in the 1999 Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art**

Mella Jaarsma was born in the Netherlands but trained in Indonesia, where she has been working as an artist since the early 1980s, so she has certain insider's knowledge and an outsider's perspective. An artwork shown in the Asia-Pacific Triennial was titled *Hi inlander (Hello native)*. The piece is a set of performance capes made from the treated skins of chicken, fish, frogs, and kangaroos. It seems Mella Jaarsma is saying something more than posing the question about what it must be like to walk around in someone else's skin. She highlights the uncertainty of identity, one that is not confined or confirmed by location or by origin. One is reminded of how much emphasis we put on identity construction in the visual arts, as we search for self and place. The work of Mella Jaarsma is a jolting reminder about how difficult it is to deal with difference in this quest.

Lee Wen is an artist from Singapore but his performance piece *Journey of a Yellow Man*, has taken him all over the globe in recent years. For several years Lee Wen has painted his whole body yellow and created art events that are usually shown as video documentation of a performance. The most obvious reference can be drawn from the way the yellow paint exaggerates his Chinese background and the varied interpretations this attracts when seen in different cultural contexts. But it's the aspect of the journey that also intrigues. There is almost an alien naïveté and honesty in the way he confronts social and political issues. His work reminds us how difficult it is to see things in a fresh way. Lee Wen reminds the viewer that locating a perspective beyond the safety zone of the acculturated self is a hard road to travel.

Another example is Ah Xian, a Chinese artist now living in Australia who exhibits his work internationally. His dilemma is one shared by many expatriate artists who struggle to reconcile the cultural values of their homeland with that of their adopted country. Ah Xian created a set of porcelain busts titled the *China. China Series*. The irony for Ah Xian is that it was after he left China that he discovered a passion for certain cultural practices and he had to return to China to train with master potters and porcelain painters. According to Ah Xian, one way to confirm the value of the human spirit and to challenge the politics of control is to reinvigorate past histories in new ways. In his hands, porcelain becomes a vehicle through which to think in a distinctive way about the old and the new, the East and the West. This goal sits nicely within the critical minds of artists who transcend cultures, politics, and geographies.

## REEMERGENCE OF THE ARTIST-THEORIST •

Considering the artist as a hybrid identity is a notion that is not inconceivable as the kind of practices that constitute what can happen in the studio can readily be placed anywhere within the discourse of cultural and educational research. This is especially relevant if research trends continue to move beyond the quest for explanatory paradigms as the long dominant positivist practices reveal themselves unable to cope with the breadth and depth of human action. This environment is a particularly rich intellectual space within which to consider the changing role of the artist and the visual image. Originally conceived as an object or icon representative of a time or place, as an informational record, or an idiosyncratic emblem, the image these days is a much more loaded text that carries all sorts of references and inferences. Research into these multiple meanings puts the image under analysis from different perspectives and highlights the robust capacity to reveal insights about individual, historical, cultural, and political content and contexts. Therefore, institutional and discipline traditions, and artworld constituencies, not only serve as interpretive communities that extend the outline of the art experience, but are also sources from which the artist actively draws as the locus of art making expands to embrace theories and practices. This creates an opportunity for the “artist-theorist” to construct a practice that is defined less by one-dimensional features such as stylistic signature, and more by imaginative inquiry that has the potential to be realized in multiple ways. Seen within wide parameters of mission and method, it is not inconceivable to define the visual image as a change agent and the research outcome as one that helps us understand the transformative power of art knowledge. Within the context of research, this implies that the visual image can be seen as a form of data that have the potential to be used as “evidence.” As data, a visual image is just raw information—it only becomes evidence when it is interpreted in some way—much in the same way that charcoal is a material that only becomes an artistic medium if it is put to creative use. Consequently, the way artists work is a distinctive human activity that shares the goals of other forms of inquiry.

Artists make informed choices about the imaginative and intellectual approaches they use when they create and respond to art. The process of making insightful decisions when carrying out research *in* art is not predicated on the assumption that there is a prescribed body of knowledge one learns and then applies. The necessity of developing a repertoire of knowledge about relevant technical processes and products is, of course, essential. However, there is little in the way of prevailing explanatory systems of knowledge in the visual arts within which new advances might be framed. The iterative or accumulative model that characterizes the development of

knowledge in the human sciences is not so evident. Yet there are cultural boundaries that serve as interpretive frames against which creative outcomes are referenced for the new can only be referenced against the old. Various theories of human processes, communal practices, and cultural agencies obviously abound and these serve as both a grounded set of conditions and an interpretive framework around which inquiry is assessed.

By necessity, the complexity of visual arts research practice *has* to bridge disciplines and in doing so not only opens up new possibilities such as those on offer within the newer information technologies, but also renders mute old arguments that see inquiry as methods bound, rather than issues driven. For the artist-theorist completing projects within the academic setting, the methods deployed in “surrounding” a research problem will be necessarily broad yet grounded in personal and public relevance. Whether undertaking research *in* art or *about* art, the artist-theorist becomes involved in a set of practices that must be defensible. The aim of research in the visual arts, as in other similar forms of exploratory inquiry, is to provoke, challenge, and illuminate rather than confirm and consolidate. Making informed choices about creative ends and means involves selecting, adapting, and constructing ways of working and ways of seeing. To do this one has to construct the tools of inquiry from an array of practices. Yet when working from a base in contemporary art, the conceptions of the discipline are uncertain, the informing parameters are open-ended, but the opportunity for inventive inquiry is at hand. In these circumstances, the artist-theorist is seen to be participating in a transdisciplinary practice. Two brief profiles of contemporary critical practice in the visual arts support this point.

## ● CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES AND PRACTICES

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### Unknowing Culture: Fred Wilson

The introduction to Peter Robb's (1998) biography of Caravaggio, “*M*,” begins with a description of a process of inquiry that is intensely human and captures the way that historical research is about trying to make visible that which is mostly unseen. But rather than creating fiction or fantasy, the assembling of evidence in all its messy minutiae is a critical and creative process of reference and inference that results in a plausible and

often a provocative representation. This is Robb's account of his research methodology:

The fragments that tell us what we know about the life and death of the painter I call M float on the surface of a treacherous reality—they're lies to the police, reticence in court, extorted confessions, forced denunciations, revengeful memoirs, self-justifying hindsight, unquestioned hearsay, diplomatic urbanities, theocratic diktat, reported gossip, threat and propaganda, angry outbursts—hardly a word untainted by fear, ignorance, malice or self interest. You have to apply a forensic and skeptical mind to the enigmas of M's life and death. You have to know how to read the evidence. You have to know the evidence is there—you need a feel for the unsaid, for the missing file, the cancelled entry, the tacit conclusion, the gap, the silence, the business done with a nod and a wink. The missing data in M's life and death make up a narrative of their own, running invisible but present through the known facts. (n.p.)

I expect Fred Wilson would delight in the details of Robb's historical digging and relate to the "need to feel for the unsaid." For it is the quest for the unsaid and the unseen that interests Wilson and he has honed his own procedures for inquiry that allow him to reveal historical omissions, distorted tales, and the misrepresented past and present. His critical eye unravels cultural constructions and institutional practices in ways that are disarming and evocative, yet they are assembled from layers of evidence that is under our noses—it's just that we don't see it.

The art practice of Fred Wilson maps loosely over the domain of *making in cultures* as described in this chapter as his work is critical in its resistance to received histories and perceived narratives. The location for much of Wilson's work since the late 1980s has been within the walls of cultural institutions, mostly museums, where walled curatorial structures used to frame the forms of cultural representation presented to the public come under his scrutiny. His critical stance is inherently multivocal and passages of privilege and position, as they are recorded in private perception and documented in public display, are sharply scissored against repressed memories and denied cultural signifiers of "otherness." As Wilson says, "I am most interested in people who are marginal or invisible to the majority, and the larger society's denial of certain issues" (2003, p. 22). His methodology is, in the main, deconstruction, where principles of cultural representation are contested, and systems of institutional practice are dismantled. His research methods

comprise comparative critique where proximity and placement create discursive narratives as forms that carry different coded histories as meanings are brought into strong contrast. And all of this occurs within the visual domain of objects, images, and spatiotemporal events that are rendered sharply in the present, as it is the immediacy of our mindset that is assailed. The evidence emerges out of the juxtaposed visual relationships that reveal new impressions and insights that could not have been possible before. What the viewer does with this information and how it might be encoded into experiential forms of understanding is a matter of personal choice. But the palpable effect of an encounter whereby prior knowledge, disturbed complacency, and the impact of a profound visual imprint, suggests that this kind of learning is real indeed.

Part of the impact of the installations created by Wilson can be tracked back to the reflexive quality he is able to invest in his works that reflect the way he “talks back” to the forms he selects and the meanings he invokes. Working in a manner that may require a scrupulous archaeological care for detail in working with objects, and a sensitive ethnographic feel for those who may have used them, Wilson’s interpretive aesthetic shapes the statement that brings these together and the context in which they are used to open up further dialogue. As with any field-based researcher, his decision making is mostly self-evident and accrued in ways that could be made more obvious if needed, but an understanding that evidence and the basis for reasoning can be represented in many forms is at the heart of his practice. His work is his art and it is his research.

Wilson’s installation, *Speak of Me as I Am*, which was the U.S. representative at the 2003 Venice Biennale, presented elements of historical narrative that tracked the centuries-old presence of African identity in the cultural diaspora around Venice. This work in the American pavilion comprised several installations that brought together in sharp contrast images and objects borrowed from regional collectors and museums. Amidst these Wilson created his own versions and visions by adapting, reconfiguring, editing, and generally recontextualizing the forms around a mostly little known set of narratives about the historical identity of black Africans. In a way, the image reproduced below, *Untitled*, reflects the discourse opened up in that the work spoke to the history and space of Venice as a city-state rather than in direct reference to any institutional or cultural practices. The looming presence was more direct—it was as if the representation of black Africans in and around Venice was an external existence, a bit like the way Venice itself is a museum whose treasures are shown on the outside, along the canals and within the commerce of daily life—the dignity of the everyday to be appreciated and understood on its own terms.



Fred Wilson, *Untitled* (2003). C-print, 13/125. 25 × 31 inches. Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

## The Necessity of Visual Dialogue: Fiona Foley

“The absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Genocchio, 2001, p. 28). This quote appears early in Benjamin Genocchio’s monograph of Fiona Foley. This crisp, lyrical line of text mirrors the sparse, spatial layers of Foley’s drawing and painting, and both word and image carry references well beyond what is immediately apparent. The absence refers in part to the physical landscape where the presence of Foley’s Aboriginal heritage is held in memories and marks tracked in her artworks. The cultural landscape, on the other hand, exists as a continual expanse of temporal space occupied by Foley’s ancestral connections to her Badtjala people. Yet this is fractured by a political landscape where the absence of evidence makes it convenient for many to remain silent about a shameful past and an uncertain present.

As an artist who exhibits and travels extensively throughout the globe, the dialogue Fiona Foley opens up through her art is readily picked up by her indigenous colleagues, which generates debate and discourse of a profound kind. Kindred histories and a clear commitment to the importance of art in narrative traditions, cultural identity, and political activism place artists in a

position where their vision and voice can be seen and heard to good effect. The irony, however, is that these richly informing experiences that contribute so much to the integrity of the arguments presented through the art of artists such as Foley mostly falls on deaf ears. The dilemma is that little public debate occurs within mainstream society, and Fiona Foley describes this as another way of remaining silent about indigenous history. In this case, continuing to ignore the present also means a failure to confront the past. Creating profound and challenging art that is displayed in the public arena, sometimes as permanent site-specific art, is only part of the process, and the outcomes wilt unless the community becomes engaged. In speaking about the Australian context, Fiona Foley explains it this way.

Because there is no analysis of the work it doesn't have a historical context, it is not spoken about, therefore there is no history of the work. So important historical moments like that in Australia are "written out" and that's very disturbing for me when the work isn't critiqued in some form. . . . Australia only sees things as a dichotomy of black and white cultures, and everything is reduced to a core between indigenous and nonindigenous, and for me that's not where it's at.<sup>13</sup>

For Foley, the need to maintain the tension is sharpened by the compulsion to make art. The process carries with it layers of details that swell with direct and indirect reference to historically grounded images and ideas. For this purpose, the historical part of her research process requires Foley to be diligent in scouring limited sources because more formal records and documents generally do not contain the information sought. Other resources, such as old postcards, memorabilia, and everyday artifacts, often serve as more accurate historical traces that hold the clues from which Foley can fashion her critical responses. Here images are wrought in the rawest of form, yet they offer cues that can be read as the narrative threads remind and provoke, render and rouse, and in ways where experience is both seen and felt. A layering of references may be there, or the simplicity of form may signify nothing more than itself, yet there is a particular kind of accessibility in the way that Foley's images or objects speak to all ages. So a playful encounter with spaces, sights, and sounds within a public art piece made by Fiona Foley may delight a child, yet it will also reward a pensive viewer who can take the time to pick up the conversation so that held assumptions are opened up to other options.

Editing out information so as to infuse a simple form with complex content is a way to not only sharpen the historical focus, but it is also an aesthetic decision used to strengthen visual thoughts. On the one hand, this process compiles form and content in a decisive mix in what Benjamin Genocchio



Fiona Foley, *Wild Times Call #2* (2001). Type C photograph. 33 × 40 inches. Series of 7 images edition of 10. Reproduced courtesy of the artist and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery.

(2001) calls Fiona Foley's "evidentiary aesthetics, a gathering together of signs and signatures . . . a building up of a data-bank of images" (pp. 87–90). The purpose here is relatively clear as the viewer is invited into the narrative. On the other hand, the license to make use of images that do not have a coded heritage means other aspects of inquiry that rely on the meanings she can embody, and the possibilities these open up for the viewer, take over for Foley. In this case, there may be a more poetic and political mix that requires the viewer to work hard to wriggle beneath the irony, metaphor, and incisive humor. The photograph *Wild Times Call #2* shows Fiona Foley as a serious participant among an identifiable group that apparently share a common ancestry; that is, if we accept the assumption that a sepia-toned ethnographic record neatly indexes those in it as people of exotic appeal who can readily be seen to belong together. Are these steadfast Seminole Indians posing in traditional dress within the sanctity of their ancestral home in southern Florida? Maybe not. How different it is when those *making* the photographs rather than those *taking* the photographs are responsible for creating false impressions. As Fiona Foley continually points out in her art practice, the

capacity of art to disrupt deep-seated inequities and to disturb long-held biases is palpable. The evidence is contained in the ideas and images, and the claim is in the interpretive power that is supported by the various visual devices used by Fiona Foley in her wry construction.

## ● CONCLUSION

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It is argued in this chapter that conceiving of art practice as research that is grounded in traditions of making can be seen as a viable way to reveal the kind of artistic knowledge that has the capacity to change us. This approach to inquiry runs in sympathy with interpretivist and critical positions in the visual arts and with the ideas and methods from the human sciences that promote the use of visual research methods. For instance, many visual artists today are broadening their practice by using many textual forms to create insightful and imaginative responses to issues of importance to them and others. Although there is no common structure or method to these artworks, there is a critical urgency in the way that ideas of individual public concern are explored and presented. Visual forms are created and critiqued in an investigative and expressive process that communicates visions, arguments, and experiences. The claim made here is that these outcomes of visual arts practice are grounded in an authentic research practice that constructs new knowledge that is individually empowering and culturally relevant.

Although important research practices in the visual arts are found in the studio, in galleries, in communities, on the street, and on the Internet, they have yet to find a rightful place within institutional settings. Thus the issue to be argued is that research in the visual arts incorporates ways of presenting, encountering, and analyzing information that is sufficiently robust to produce new knowledge that can be encountered and acted on. It is possible to consider "the visual" not only as a descriptive or representational form, but also as a means of creating and constructing images that forms an evidential base that reveals new knowledge. Seen from this perspective, the role of visual data in research can be used to move beyond the contribution to explanatory knowledge production, and to a more ambitious state of transformative knowledge construction.

The quest to breach the boundaries of research practice is not without its critics, either from the ire of artworld criticism, or fire from the academic canon, and the dilemma of how to integrate the arts within the academy is not new. As was described in Chapter 1, the institutionalization of visual arts practice has a long and illustrious history. In each era, the formal training of the fine artist invariably created a schism between those within the institution

who saw a need to uphold authority, and those from without who challenged it. Many advocates of the training of artists see the marketplace of the art-world as the arbiter that offers professional success, with institutions being mostly responsible for technical training. Those who seek academic status for the profession invariably have to respond to the challenge of setting creative practice on a more grounded discipline foundation. As such, the university exerts its own institutional power. The challenge is how to accommodate these demands yet also maintain a degree of integrity about what constitutes art as a field of study. It is in the area of research where these distinctions become the sharpest.

Part of the legacy of conceptualizing studio art practice as research is the opportunity it gives to reconsider the inextricable relationship between theory and practice. Assembling new historical and critical traditions of fine arts alongside equally diverse studio practices means that the alliance between the artist and the art writer is seen as a shared collaboration that investigates the artwork in a speculative quest to explore the unknown. For the artist, the artwork embodies the questions, ideas, and images, whereby for the art writer, the word becomes the vehicle to advance new realms of investigative possibility. In this case, the coalition between the visual and the verbal is both critical and supportive. New transdiscipline alliances between artists and art writers, and artists and scientists, for instance, are being enacted in those collaborative projects involving the use of digital technologies. The caricatures of the eccentric scientist, the reclusive artist, or the computer nerd have little basis in the reality of the multidisciplinary environment of today. While critical theorists and visual culture critics raise pertinent questions about problematic relationships among art, science, and technology, there is a need to move beyond an analysis that still sees domains of knowledge in paradigmatic terms. In the many situations where artists and scientists are collaborating, there is little talk that sees science as merely a rationalistic endeavor or art as only an expressive activity. These imaginative investigators are working beyond the restriction of defined discipline parameters and are guided by questions, issues, and abstractions where new knowledge is seen as a function of creating and critiquing human experience.

## NOTES •

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1. For a review of implications of the digital age and the impact in areas such as visual culture and identity politics, see Darley (2000) and Turkle (1995). For reference to visual artists working across disciplines in the art and sciences, see Casti and Karlqvist (2003), and for within the digital domain, see Lovejoy (1997).

2. For examples of critiques of epistemological and ontological conceptions of research from an indigenous perspective, see Semali and Kincheloe (1999) and Tuhiwai Smith (1999). For examples within the context of visual arts, see Mundine (1996), Myers (2002), and Staikidis (2004).

3. Initially brought to attention through critiques such as Edward Said's (1978) analysis of cultural representation in the late 1970s, the scope and depth of critical artistic investigation of the East-West divide has grown in rich and expansive ways. For examples within the visual arts, see Alice Yang (1998); art exhibition catalogues such as *How Latitudes Become Forms: Art in a Global Age* (Vergne, Kortun, & Hou, 2003); *Beyond the Future: The Third Asia-Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art* (Webb, 1999); and the journal *Art AsiaPacific* (see <http://www.artasiapacific.com>). For literary examples, I am indebted to Aphrodite Désirée Navab (2004) for drawing to my attention the work of Iranian American artists and poets (Karim & Khorrami, 1999).

4. The notion of "feedback" is at the heart of many human processes from constructivism to cybernetics where learning is informed by interactions that are used to adapt behavior and direct change.

5. See, for example, the Performance Art Pedagogy of Charles Garoian (1999), in which he incorporates features of performance art, postmodernism, and critical pedagogy that encourages students' embodied learning experiences.

6. For an example of how artworld critics, anthropologists, and cultural theorists talk amongst themselves but not to each other, and in doing so render the voice of the subject mute, see Fred Myers (1995). In the chapter, "Representing Culture: The Production of Discourse(s) for Aboriginal Acrylic Paintings" (pp. 55–95), Myers reviews the discourse about the acrylic painting of Central Desert Aboriginal artists shown in 1988 in New York as part of the exhibition *Dreamings: The Art of Aboriginal Australia*. In a follow-up assessment of this event, Myers positions the debates more clearly from the perspective of the indigenous artists in describing the artworks and performances as forms of social practice (Myers, 2002, pp. 255–276).

7. The exhibition *Yankee Remix: Artists take on New England* (summer 2003 to spring 2004) was a collaboration between the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (MASS MoCA) and the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities (SPNEA). Nine artists—Rina Banerjee, Ann Hamilton, Martin Kersels, Zoe Leonard, Annette Messenger, Manfred Pernice, Huang Yong Ping, Lorna Simpson, and Fred Violich—were commissioned to create interpretive works dealing with issues of memory and meaning using artifacts from SPNEA's extensive archival collection.

8. Despite educational theory and practice and moves towards inclusivity, we still render many indigenous people invisible. The book *Dreamkeepers* is fairly typical of cultural travelogues, and the front cover has an extreme close-up image of an Aboriginal man with white ocher daubed across his nose. A comment on the cover suggests that the author, Harvey Arden (1994), "allows the Aboriginal people to speak for themselves. . . ." Yet it is strange how it is only Harvey's name that appears on the cover. On the back cover (and three more times in the opening pages) we are told that the person who *took* the photograph was Mike Osborn. We are never told the name of the person pictured on the front—until page 165—when we find out it is Jack Rogers.

9. The exhibition *The Native Born* (1996) on display at the Asia Society Gallery in New York in 2002, curated by Djon Mundine, challenged Western notions of how typologies of knowledge are constructed. In doing so, Mundine not only presented indigenous relational systems of epistemology, he also positioned the visual image as being central to ontological beliefs about cultural meaning, history, and location.

10. Any list of theorists and practitioners who endorse a view that the visual arts is an inherently cultural, political, and socially embedded educational experience will be very long. Insightful arguments and strategies for inquiry centered around art making as a community practice in all its guises will be found in the writings of Blandy and Congdon (1987); Chalmers (1996, 2002); Congdon, Blandy, and Bolin (2001); Duncum (2002); Freedman (2003); jagodzinski (1997a, 1997b); Krug (2003); McFee (1998); Neperud (1995); Paley (1995); and Stuhr (1994, 2003).

11. I am indebted to Gillian Rose (2001) for highlighting the distinction between the modernist notion of “to see is to know” and the postmodern concept that to “know is to see.”

12. For a discussion of the politics of representation within the museum context in general, and the Smithsonian Institution in particular, see Henderson and Kaeppler (1999).

13. Unless otherwise stated, Fiona Foley’s quotes are taken from an interview with the author conducted on February 19, 2001, at Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, NY.