Lent and Borrowed: risk and distributed authorship in tertiary studio research

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Abstract

Engaging public, participatory or interactive methods in an art practice invites risk. Practices that interact with socialities and systems are open to unpredictability, and potentiality, and are sensitive to the behaviour of others. Porous to the world, these works are agentially entangled; formed by the commingled actions of artist, participant, material and institution. These emergent aspects of contemporary practice and form important trajectories in tertiary studio research. Students making works that incorporate different agencies (and by extension, risk) pose a challenge for art schools in how they are assessed and supervised. We consider the degrees of adversity that foster productive risk in studio research, as weighed against the need to shield students, staff and institutions from danger and liability.

The first discussion is centred on (and co-authored) through an undergraduate supervision example. Sasha Grbich and Ash Tower discuss the development of Tower's work undertaken during his final year (under Grbich's supervision), Postcards from the Bibliopolis (2013). The

second example details a current student, Alycia Bennett and her work Announcement (2015) made during the second year sculpture elective Installation as part of the BVA program. The examples activates questions of distributed authorship, students collaborating with outside institutions and the performance of works within public systems.

Keywords: distributed authorship, risk, studio research, systems, live art

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Tertiary visual arts degrees rely on a student's performance in self-directed studio research to assess and confer degrees that prepare students for careers as practicing artists. It is also widely recognised that a social milieu develops parallel to these school-supported studio practices, where students begin to challenge traditional notions of authorship, working with other people, systems, and materials as generative practices. In this paper we discuss the work of two students of the Adelaide Central School of Art and their incorporation of risk and distribution of authorship in the works they have created, as well as the tactics that were employed in their supervision and assessment.

Both of the cases discussed here were undertaken during a Bachelor of Visual Art (BVA) at the Adelaide Central School of Art. As this paper discusses risk and distributed authorship through the delivery of the BVA program, we begin each case with a brief description of each student's position in the program, in order to understand its role in the student's practice, and their subsequent work. The bulk of the discussion is centred on (and co-authored) through an undergraduate supervision example. Sasha Grbich and Ash Tower discuss the development of Tower's work undertaken during his final year (under Grbich's supervision), *Postcards from the Bibliopolis* (2013). The second example is included to provide an alternative context to the issues discussed in the *Postcards* project. The case details a current student, Alycia Bennett, and her work *Announcement* (2015) made during the second-year sculpture elective as part of the BVA program.

In our discussion of agency and material discursivity, we look to the practices of material-semiotics to account for influencing factors beyond the artist, and their hand in the subsequent

studio work. Physicist-philosopher Karen Barad reminds us that 'the space of agency is not restricted the possibilities of human action' (Barad, 2007). From the work of sociologists Bruno Latour and John Law, we argue that this 'agency' can be distributed between human and non-human entities such as objects, systems and institutions (Latour, 2005 & Law, 2009). Indeed, the practice-led methods of research fostered in art schools require a 'complex, back-and-forth interaction between the practice and its conceptual framework or articulation' (McNamara, 2012) that already look toward these influences in their reflexive cycles.

A Note on Risk and Distributed Authorship

This paper addresses two key elements of risk and distributed authorship. It addresses both of these elements as the authors believe them to be inextricably connected, insofar as they both deal with agency and effect beyond the artist. Students are increasingly constructing works that are porous to the world, agentially entangled, and formed by the commingled actions of artist, participant, material and institution. The reason that a distinction is maintained is to differentiate the agent's point of origin, and how it impacts the work and traditional assessment models.

Here we describe 'risk' as the potential for agential forces to effect and be effected by the performance of an artwork. Put simply, 'risk' refers to the events beyond the control of, and potentially antagonistic to, entities involved in the project. Within this context, 'risk' activates discussion of potential effects for students, to participating audiences and to the institution.

We describe 'distributed authorship' as agential forces that contribute to the realisation of the work. These are elements that provide a generative contribution to the work (instead of elements that are simply enlisted to realise the artist's 'grand design'). At this time, this approach responds to interest in post-human theory and the decentralisation of the artist through dispersion of the power intrinsic to a single authorial position (Barthes, 1978 & Blanchot, 1997). Artists working in this way knowingly open artworks to the uncertainty of not-knowing.

We are dealing with dissonant agency, and as such there is no definitive line between these definitions. The idea that other entities contribute authorship through brief collisions in each other's day-to-day lives opens the floodgate to an endless sequence of causal events that play a part in the work's becoming. The question we enter as a teaching institution is how to facilitate and assess the intention of the artist as a cardinal point in a knot of entangled agencies. While

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the intent of the author (outside of an institutional setting) is contested ground, it remains that a studio student's 'intent' plays a significant role in their formal assessment through the exegetical requirements of their degree (Durling, 2002).

Assessment Contexts

As this paper examines the relationship between assessment contexts and artworks produced in institutions, the differences between these cases bears mentioning. The two case studies mentioned in this article were undertaken during the Bachelor of Visual Art, but at different points in the program. The *Postcards* project was undertaken during the final year of the BVA program. During this year, students are provided with a studio space to work in a self-directed way for the year, but in each semester the amount of direction from lecturers and colleagues differs. The first semester comprises of a combination of individual studio exploration, one-on-one facilitator consultation, and classes with peers, where students respond to open-ended briefs through their own conceptual interests. At the end of the first semester students submit a 'proposal' affirming their direction, and select a supervisor for one-on-one weekly supervision in place of their assigned facilitator. The emphasis of the second semester is on the resolution of works towards assessment (and the subsequent graduate exhibition). In this period, students define their own question that focuses the direction of their studio practice. Their intention (presented in a 1000-word synopsis and 30-minute viva) forms the framework against which they are assessed.

In contrast, *Announcement* was completed as a part of the 'Sculpture 2.3: Video and Performance' subject, a coursework unit typically taken as an elective in the second year of the BVA program. As a result, the assignment brief of *Announcement* was more defined than a third year studio element, was internally assessed, and was not made towards a graduate exhibition. *Announcement*'s existence in a more sheltered part of BVA program raises a different set of challenges than in *Postcards*, as it is precisely this sheltering that hinders the work, relegating it to a prototype of its 'ideal' form. These differences are important to keep in mind through the discussion of each case.

Postcards from the Bibliopolis

Postcards from the Bibliopolis (the *Postcards* project, for short) is a work that examines the complex socio-technical system of the Barr Smith Library at the University of Adelaide. Tower's studio research is directed towards studying systems, particularly, systems of storing and

distributing knowledge. In 2013, his studio inquiry grappled with how library users interface with a system that mobilises a colossal volume of knowledge. To that end, he would move through the shelving within the library searching for traces of human engagement. These traces most commonly occurred in the form of handwritten notes left amongst books or shelving. These notes were collected and their locations were logged according to the Dewey Decimal Index—through this, the trips to the library became akin to scientific fieldwork. These notes were varied in nature—they encompassed laboratory protocols, essay bullet-points, shopping lists, reminders, and due dates. Ultimately, these written traces were embedded in book-sized blocks of resin, equipped with magnetic security 'bugs' and Dewey reference numbers, and reinserted back into the library. The resulting work was a series of small, personal moments left in the wake of library users, granted authority through resin embedding, moving through the library as not-for-loan 'books'.

Figure 1 Ash Tower, 2013, *Postcards from the Bibliopolis*, found paper, resin. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 2 *Postcards from the Bibliopolis*, Barr Smith Library installation.

The *Postcards* project was borne from a fascination with how everyday systems are comprised of various elements of different constitutions—what John Law terms 'heterogeneity' (Law and Singleton, 2013). It follows that its dispersed material-semiotic elements should be incorporated in its presentation, specifically, and engagement with the library administration, in spite of the time constraints of the project.

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As the governing body of the library, the librarians and associated staff have significant responsibility over the performance of the library system. Introduced to the Acquisition and Metadata Services Librarian (by way of an art school colleague), Tower was offered a meeting with the Head and Deputy Head Librarians. This meeting proved pivotal as an 'entry point' into the system, circumventing other staff members who may have lacked the authority (or interest) to assist with the project. In the context of digital scholarship and university-led digital learning strategies, libraries are having to reassess their traditional roles in education and knowledge stewardship. It is possible that this shift led the librarians to take an interest in the *Postcards* project, facilitating what sociologist Bruno Latour calls 'imputing interests', for 'he who is able to translate others interests into his own language carries the day' (Latour, 1983). The conversations with the librarians yielded a series of suggestions about the presentation of the work, an interest in the future of the project, and even an offer to request the reshelving team to assist with collecting notes. These conversations show the librarians' investment in the project through their creative input. The agency of the librarians here becomes entangled within the work—without their advice, the possibility of adding RFID tags ('bugs') to the resin books would never have been realised. Subsequently, their role shifts into authorial positions, rendering possibilities in the work due to their knowledge of the library system, and their professional positions.

The *Postcards* project represented elements of risk in its entanglement in the BVA program, which fed back into the production and final appearance of the work. Tower's connection to the Adelaide Central School of Art positioned him as representative of that organisation. This raises the question of how (or if) institutions and supervisors should assist the student in managing relationships to third parties. If so, what effect does the presence of the art school have? Had the relationship been formalised, it is possible that the Barr Smith library would have been dissuaded from assisting with the work—its prospects now too official, and, with the school's involvement, the risk of professional (or even contractual) obligation. The *Postcards* project was afforded greater agility by the student's informal relationship to the library, but this entailed greater risk on behalf of the art school being represented by the student, lacking control of that representation.

While the library agreed to host the *Postcards* project during the graduate exhibition, it was unfeasible for the assessment panel to travel out to site during the limited time scheduled for assessment. Subsequently, the *Postcards* project was installed out-of-site in the gallery space

(Figure 1), alongside other works. The institution's refusal to assess the work in situ was based, in part, on the idea of parity between students, they felt unable to facilitate equal opportunity when one student may require more time or space than another. Enacting this position as an assessment policy led to preempting the form and presentation of this and other artworks. This points to an 'explicative method' (Rancière, 1991) wherein lecturers lead students towards a known outcome. In contraposition, an 'emancipatory method' (Rancière, 1991) would be student-led and open to unpredictable outcomes and requirements, embodying what we refer to as 'intellectual equality'. In this case, 'intellectual equality' was easily employed as Grbich was only familiar with half of Tower's theoretical framework, allowing the pair to work through unfamiliar elements together.

At the time, the third-year assessment model involved students being allocated empty teaching spaces akin to traditional modes of gallery presentation where they would install works and speak with a panel comprised of members external to the school alongside academic staff. Practices situated outside the gallery were curtailed into documentation as presentation or unsatisfying out-of-site presentation (as in the case of Tower's work). To assess the work via documentation sells short its experiential, temporal and affective aspects. The position taken by the institution, while led by the need for equal advantage, was also underscored by financial restriction in staff hours around assessment. To be responsive to emergent practices requires agility in case-by-case and student-led models. In the case of the *Postcards* project, we adopted a model of 'supported independence', where Tower negotiated the relationship with the library on his own terms, and Grbich regularly reflected on that relationship with him, while simultaneously keeping the representation of the institution in mind. This tactic of 'supported independence' can also refer to how Grbich worked alongside Tower in managing the relationship to the library, which, at times, involved trusting that the agreement forged between the library and the student would yield assessable results.

By installing the work in the Barr Smith Library for the following graduate exhibition, visitors to the gallery had to be alerted to the work installed in the library by a tear-off list of the book's locations positioned in the gallery. The execution of the *Postcards* project under the auspices of the BVA program begins to open the work to a range of heterogeneous factors—the librarians, the degree program, the assessment conditions and the library system are all entangled within the complex relational web of the *Postcards* project.

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Announcement

Alycia Bennett's work *Announcement* offers a different context for the interplay of risk and distributed authorship. It consists of a performance where participants enter a darkened room with single light source, featuring a box with a one-way mirror in the corner, and striped hazard tape demarcating a circuit on the floor. Once in the space, participating audiences are privy to a series of polite but authoritarian messages interspersed by a rising and falling four note sequence made familiar by a broad range of public space announcements. A warm but firm female voice instructs (or suggests) that visitors remain within the designated area, do not cross the line, walk within a clockwise direction, keep within the passage and turn off mobile phones. A squat cardboard-box-dwelling inhabits one corner of the room that contains the artist, watching and unseen. As the performance continues, the incessant announcements begin to respond to movements and behaviours of the participants, creating a feedback loop where participants realise that the voice is not pre-recorded, but is emanating from an unseen surveilling authority.

Figure 1. Alycia Bennett, 2015, *Announcement*, video still. Image courtesy of the artist.

The crux of the work is found in resistance, where dissonant agencies perform spaces and rules, creating a feedback loop where each agent attempts to establish control in the space. The work is most interesting in moments when the voice recedes, leaving visitors to decide their own course of action. An analogy for mechanisms of public social control, Bennett's work also contributes to experiments in reciprocity and reciprocal relations in post-object art, were relational exchanges replace traditional commercial exchange and value systems (Kwon, 2003).

The more structured, classroom setting of the Video and Performance unit means that tactics of 'intellectual equality' and 'supported independence' cannot be applied to *Announcement* in the same way as *Postcards*. *Announcement* is featured here to draw attention to how it raises challenges and risks for both institution and student. Sited within the school building and with an exclusively art student audience the situation was a problematic sample of the public. It raises an important question as to who constitutes 'the public', and risks Claire Bishop's criticism of relational aesthetics as risking predictable conversations within established communities such as the art world (Bishop, 2004). This iteration of *Announcement* caused little direct risk because of the closed community in which it acted. Restaging the work in a less predictable public zone like a gallery may have provided a better gauge as to the effectiveness of challenges to power structures implicit in the work, while causing far greater risks for institution, participants and students. Thus an inverse correlation is established, where the more *Announcement* reaches its ideal audience (an unassuming public), the more risk is presented to the institution in its responsibility for a public work that employs themes of authority and social control.

Assessment of participatory work raised questions for the institution by challenging the assumed primacy of the artist/ author's agency, leading to the requirement for new criteria. 'Bourriaud… argues that the criteria we should use to evaluate open-ended, participatory artworks are not just aesthetic, but political and even ethical: we must judge the "relations" that are produced by relational artworks.' (Bishop, 2004). In order to discuss relations, Bourriaud returns to reflection on the open systems established by work in question "does this work permit me to enter into dialogue? Could I exist, and how, in the space it defines?" (Bourriaud, 1998). To comprehensively answer Bourriaud's questions requires first-hand experience of the work. To examine the criteria Bishop raises requires the work acting within live systems and long term observation of the complex event chains activated by the artwork event.

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Conclusions

As educators we hope for students to make works that open beyond what we expect and know. This approach to pedagogy activates a position of 'intellectual equality' (Rancière, 1991). To teach via explication re-enforces a power structure that holds students as ignorant and teacher as provider of knowledge, 'the child that is explained to will devote his [sic] intelligence to… understanding that he doesn't understand unless he is explained to.' (Rancière, 1991). Counter to this position Rancière proposes that teacher and student both be understood as concurrently ignorant and knowing, and together translate from a third term (in this discussion, an artwork in progress). Artworks are unknowable objects, particularly when they lead research and are made in ways open to the world. We recommend a fundamental change in teacher student hierarchy which would see supervisors translating with, rather than for students. Led by the discoveries of the student we cannot preempt or dictate form, and need to expect to adapt teaching and assessment models responsively to the challenges posed by artworks acting within complex systems.

While we agree with Neil Fettling's call for art schools to engage in collaborations and partnerships beyond the art-school walls, engaging what he terms a 'roaming faculty' (Fettling, 2015), our designation of 'distributed authorship' is not collaboration. As collaboration can imply both an equal contribution and a unified goal, we use 'distributed authorship' to ascribe different authorial positions, recognising, for example, the dual positions of the subjects in *Announcement* as both viewers and performers. We also advocate for a responsive attitude towards students engaging third parties, as with the case of the Barr Smith Library. In this circumstance, Grbich would keep tabs on Tower's progress with the librarians, but deemed the informal engagement to be suited to the student's work. As mentioned earlier in our discussion, we recommend a model of supported independence, in supervisory relationships to allow greater agility required in the development of projects involving risk and distributed authorship.

Through these cases we hope to outline some of the challenges presented by students making work requiring these notions of risk and distributed authorship. *Postcards from the Bibliopolis* and *Announcement* both demonstrate the dependency of open works on other agencies to begin to function. The *Postcards* project derived its basic content (the notes) from other authors, before redistributing them in a library system whose constant dynamism ensures that several components to the work go missing every time it is shown. *Announcement* is a work about exercising authority, using materials and conventions that viewers often associated with

instruction. The richness of the work is to be found in misbehaviour, however, and *Announcement* establishes a stage where participants claim creative authorship over the work through resistance. Through these case studies, we have expounded elements of risk and distributed authorship. Developing the concerns of parity, supportive independence and intellectual equality we move to better define complications and offer some recommendations for teaching and assessing works that are open to the world.

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