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Beyond Competition Theory: A Speculative Model for Consortia Development in Visual Art Education

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In this text we rehearse a dialogue across institutions. It starts as a conventional paper delivered as it was during the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools (ACUAD) New Networks Conference in late 2021. The four authors from Deakin University and the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology deliver their sections on the problems, as they see it, with the neo-liberalisation of creative arts pedagogy in tertiary institutions while offering extramural projects and theoretical frames to muse on the possibilities for a cross-institutional public art project, supported by Hobsons Bay City, in 2022. The paper devolves, from a sober discussion and speculative questioning into a meshing of voices and theories, propositions and rebuttals, to arrive at a confusion of values, gleaned from the heavily over-determined and marketed pillars, principles and strategic plans of our various organisations. In doing this we playfully and poetically presage the inevitable bureaucratic mire that the speculative project might find itself in.

Strength in Numbers (David Cross)

Stefan Hertmans in his text 'Masters of Unpredictability Academies and Art Education' outlines the fundamental disconnect between academic bureaucracies and the teaching of art. Faced with an imperative, in his words, to regulate and predict everything, he suggests the solution to this cultural chasm is for art academics to demand independence, to insist on the fundamental value of open goals without finality. While posing this dilemma as a problem for educational bureaucracy, not a problem for art, Hertmans suggests that art educators need to push back on the instrumentalised bureaucratic imperative and simply demand that experimental cognition drive the tertiary learning ethos (2012).

While the idea of the dog wagging the tail seems obviously prescient, the simple prescription that the solution is as basic as educating the machine runs aground when the machine is calibrated, actually structured, to neutralise the value of experimental cognition. Rather than listen to a heartfelt treatise on art for art's sake and the necessity for academic independence, institutions are far more likely to close programs that will not play ball with the gospel of job-readiness. As a sector we share a common challenge of being organisationally isolated within each tertiary environment where our values and ethos are increasingly marginalised and seen as at best quaint and at worst antithetical. Our strength is evident in forums such as ACUADS and DDCA (Australian Council of Deans and Directors of Creative Arts), but this disguises the dilution within each tertiary provider. How then might we play to our strengths and not run aground following Hertmans' suggestion to talk with the taxman about poetry?

The answer is both obvious and complex: inventing new collaborative models across universities. Beyond ARC (Australian Research Council) and sector bodies such as ACUADS, the imperative to collaborate is neutered by the competitive nature of universities. In such an environment, it is difficult to convince management to support pan-university research projects where the CI (chief investigator) role is split across multiple fronts. Indeed the very nature of the designation CI hinders the possibility of shared agency. But it is precisely in new pan-university research projects that resilient economies of scale can be built. While ARC linkage and discovery projects clearly serve to build collaboration, what new approaches might be offered whereby a number of institutions can come together to collectively build research capacity, to develop innovative consortia projects connecting industry and community at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels?

Such an approach could see a pan-university HDR (Higher Degree Research) supervision model as against a competitive one, and the formation of substantial national research clusters that are properly resourced, rather than our current reality of mostly atomised entities scattered across the sector struggling consistently to garner support. Developed as memorandum of understandings or indeed something more elegant, these pan-university structures would serve to strengthen each partner against the vagaries of one university's decision-making and also create the conditions for much

greater economies of scale in terms of research ambition. In loosening a student's identification with a university, greater emphasis might/could be placed on the discipline and on the all important goals of industry/community engagement. But for such a shift to occur we need to derive the overarching ethos of competition.

An Ecology for Collectivity (Katie Lee)

It is important to demythologise the idea that artists thrive working alone. It's a romantic notion, emerging from the cliché of an artist in their garret, especially productive when lonely and depressed. In fact, many artists thrive working in community, and unsurprisingly often need to be happy to be creative. Having the opportunity to collaborate with other artists should be critical to any learning environment and form the basis of any meaningful introduction to the arts industry.

I hold this position as a visual artist well used to the individualistic meritocracy to which many artists, I believe, accidentally subscribe. Unlike other industries, (film, architecture, theatre, dance) many visual artists are educated in, and still seem wedded to, a notion that being an artist is akin to being a one-man-band. If we are 'discovered' all our pesky problems will go away. However much of our ambition and our work out-scales this quaint notion. So too does the scale and economy of our local art market, which in Australia cannot necessarily support the number of excellent artists we have. (This is before we even begin to follow the money and analyse who it is exactly <<wealthy people and institutions>> we have outsourced and indexed our sense of self-worth and notion of success to.)

Many young undergraduate students enrolling in the creative arts arrive hoping to find this magic arts industry that will value their individual creative contribution. They dream of 'becoming famous', and often begin an art school education with little awareness of what an arts industry actually is, let alone what it could be. This disconnect is especially acute for high school leavers, who go from studying self-expression and 'famous' artists in year 12, only to be told that there is little chance of that happening to them and being overwhelmed by a different set of targets and agendas once their higher education begins, including very discouraging statistics on the likelihood that they will survive (as an artist that is).

However, I would like to propose a different interpretation of these figures. Despite the data touted by educational institutions and governments about the lack of jobs in the creative arts, and the small number of students who continue in the field, I don't believe the hard data captures the rich ecology that creative artists create for themselves, and then work within. It is important to recognise this, as we are in an era in which hard data is constantly used against us.

My position on this emerged from scarcity. I went to art school in Hobart, Tasmania during the 90's recession. There were few galleries, zero external opportunities, and no red carpet waiting at the end of my degree. When faced with a series of closed and closing doors, I banded together with a very motley crew and opened up an Artist Collective in the Salamanca Arts Center, amongst the wool shops and secondhand books stores. We invited other art students to sell their work to the public. I am shocked to say two things of this venture: 1) I supported myself financially by selling my work throughout my undergraduate studies, and 2) the collective is still there.



Figure 1: Conical Inc. Committee, *Bracket Creep*, 2007.

Since then, I have continued to work in collaborative environments, for example, Artist Run Spaces run by committees of practicing artists such as Conical Inc., and WestSpace. These spaces in turn, offer opportunities for artists to collaborate, and form lateral relationships within the otherwise very hierarchical structures of the professional ladder. These traditional professional hierarchies, although prestigious, are still limiting to many artists. For example, artists who have shown at major institutions and private galleries still showed their work in project spaces such as Conical, because the emphasis was on, as David described above, experimental cognition. This phenomenon, a kind of professional bracket-creep, saw artist-run spaces such as Conical no longer supporting only emerging artists but also the experimentally cognitive literati. This was captured by our committee-led exhibition, 'Bracket Creep', pictured here in Figure 1, in which the office space of Conical Inc. was temporarily located upside down in the ceiling, noting the heavy administrative overlay, as conceptual praxis.

Projects initiated by spaces such as WestSpace and Conical model the way collaboration operates to generate opportunities. For example, the mentorship project run over a 2-year period at Conical called 3Square involved 3 mentors from 3 Melbourne universities/art schools, and 6 emerging artists. Each group worked together creating new work, building new relationships and establishing and expanding audiences, across generations and institutions.

Tyger! Tyger! at Westspace paired 6 established artists with any artist of their choosing – likewise creating new networks and collaborative relationships within a series of exhibitions. Artists invited to participate in these ventures used the opportunity to expand their own collaborative and experimental processes and networks.

These kinds of initiatives build networks, dialogue and culture, and generate opportunities. By sharing these opportunities horizontally, a genuine arts ecology emerges whereby cross-sections of the community are brought into relationship – strengthening and making more visible outcomes. At very few times during this period would I have ticked a box on the census saying my income came from art. However, my identity, my community and my creative practice absolutely did.

It is imperative that higher education institutions show emerging artists the kinds of opportunities that can come from working collaboratively and, even more importantly, how large-scale projects and events are driven from and by these relationships. By working with others, artists can infiltrate the system. Collaborative models become ouroboros: allowing artists to go bigger and stage even larger events, creating the industry into which we can then participate, work, and belong.

Assembling Collectives for Real Work (Fiona Hillary and Cameron Bishop in italics)

Consortia building across universities is not new work; it's critical work. Our allegiance must be to the manifestation of consortia. In her recent publication, Natalie Loveless poses an insightful question for us to consider:

... how might we, workers in the university, orient ourselves in our current project of everyday academic life under the sign of the Anthropocene and its others (the Plantationocene, the Chthulucene, etc.)? How might we inhabit human, non-human, never-been-human, and more- than-human social webs differently at all scales of existence? (Loveless 2019, 100)

We have a shared interest in unearthing new stories, exploring old stories and decentering existing stories of site.

How does this, though, in working outside of the bounds of the institutionalised economic imperative, competition, bureaucratic hobbling and alienation, work in actuality? It starts in quiet conversation about a site, and serendipity. When I first talked to Megan Evans, the curator at Wyndham Art Gallery, and Monika Schott (external relations at Deakin University) about internships at the gallery in 2013, I did this at the behest of my paymasters, and of course for the students, to build their skillsets in production, curation, administration and unpaid labour. But we stumbled in our conversation, and started talking shit. WE talked about the smell of it, the stigma of it, the wildlife that emanates from it. We were talking about the Western Treatment Plant, Melbourne's oldest and largest wastewater treatment facility, only a few kilometres south of where we were sitting.

We bonded over the creative possibilities of what lay behind the 35km fenceline that runs parallel to the freeway joining Melbourne and Geelong. Depending on which way the wind is blowing in Melbourne's west, we all get to smell it from time to time, but what were the stories behind its olfactics? There's the universal and the transversal, scalar and the vectoral. There are steps and relays, channels, locks and threshing machines, dealing with the task of diluting and removing pathogens from our wastewater for its safe evacuation, eventually into the sea, and nearby farms. There are technological histories here, labour histories that intersect with cultural histories that coincide with colonising infrastructures. It's where a diversity of birdlife to rival Kakadu's has come to reside, for varying periods of time through any given year. To experience the space is to confront the real at both affective and cultural levels.

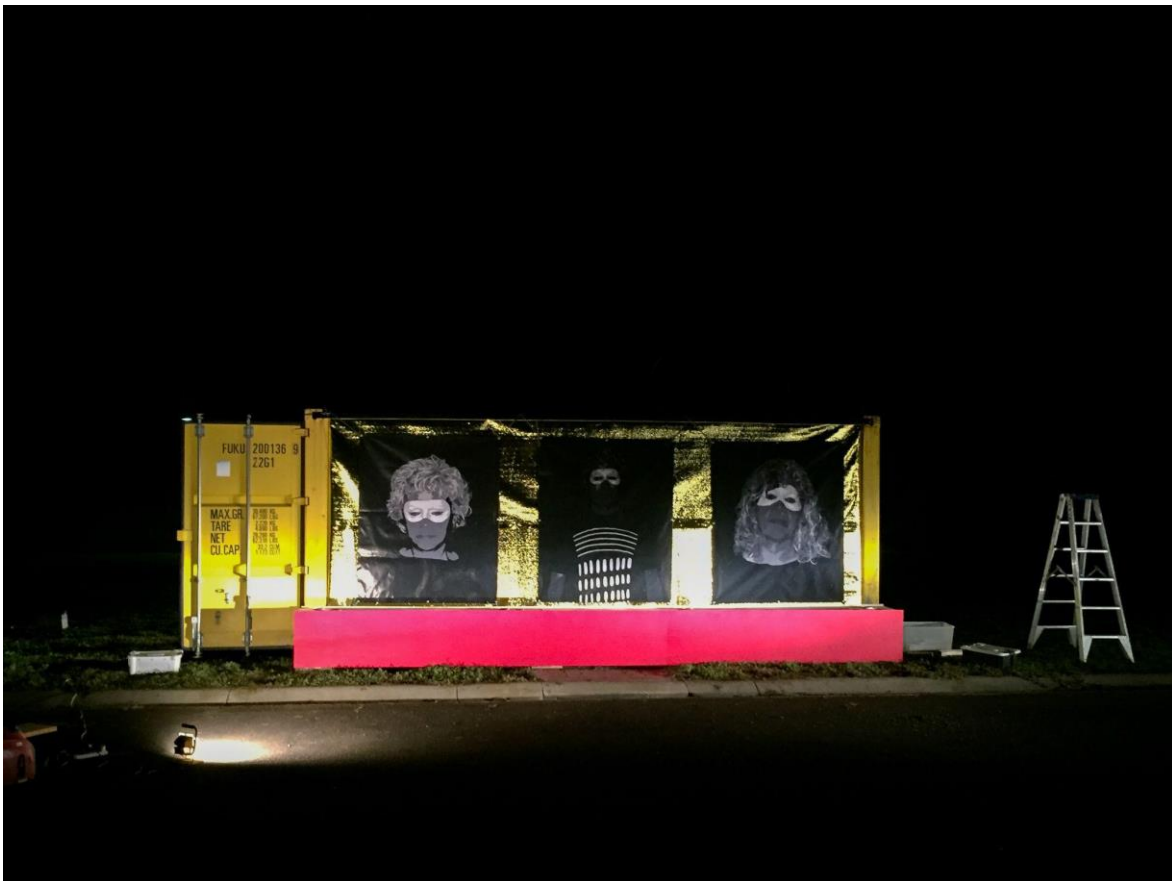


Figure 2: Maree Clarke, *Ritual and Ceremony* (Treatment Flightlines), 2017

This is where the public art project and generative assemblage, Treatment, was conceived, in curiosity and conversation about the real. Treatment is now into its third iteration, and it has come out of Melbourne Water's plant to stretch from Werribee, back up the heritage main sewer outfall, all the way to Scienceworks, with a brief now to connect the diverse communities the pipeline runs through. Partners include the cities of Wyndham and Hobsons Bay, Scienceworks, and Melbourne Water. Since its first run in 2015 it has supported tens of internships from Deakin; it has set up a curatorial fellowship scheme where emerging creatives work with curators, production staff and artists; it has given invaluable experience to dozens of site coordinators and volunteers from various Wyndham community groups, and the council; and it has gifted new insight to thousands of visitors, from birdwatchers to artists, to academics and the local community, into our wastewater technologies and their histories and the plant's critical importance to the life of Melbourne city.

The kind of consortia that has come into being here was formed serendipitously, in dialogue between a group of artists, first and foremost. Out of the 2015 and 2017 public art events that ran through the Western Treatment Plant we have developed numerous public art projects at undergrad level and five PhDs from different institutions that came from artists, writers and researchers making work in response to the site and curatorial themes. In bringing together a public art project like Treatment, inadvertently, and against all instincts, we have been building a multi-institutional assemblage, that gives us a model for what Fiona Hillary is proposing here: A consortia that builds a project with Hobsons Bay City, RMIT and Deakin University from the ground up, enabling a situated pedagogy for undergrads, postgrads and local participants, to make place-responsive work with artists and curators, sharing curriculum and resources across organisations.

In this consortia, from the confines of the traditional structural barriers of institutions, we are exploring the fence line of the Altona Treatment Plant that might fence in our effluent, keeping us safe from our own shit – at the same time fencing in an internationally recognised artwork in disrepair, Agnes Denes' *A Forest for Australia* 1998.

What is our role in removing the structural barriers to consortia practices in art education and research and as active citizens in the world that would allow us to address the needs of Denes' *Forest* collaboratively?

Embracing the assemblages of society – human, non-human, more than human, we turn to thinkers like Donna Haraway and Anna Tsing – it's all about the marks of care we leave and the art of living on a damaged planet. (Haraway 2016, Tsing, Swanson, Gan and Bubandt 2017). We know that the creativity and innovation that emerges from a collaborative consortia is generative, not delivering a describable product to industry, instead bringing industry on the journey – exploring hard questions – creating new stories and new possibilities. The consortia largely built out of Bishop and Cross's work, *Treatment*, is a testament to this kind of research assemblage.

We have common goals:

- Establish test sites of practice and pedagogy – where all members of the consortia coalesce;
- Explore what it means to be an artist, what it means to be an artist-researcher in a neo-liberal world, and what it means to subvert being an artist in a neo-liberal world through collective experimental cognition;
- Do the work to maintain practice-led research in a competitive field; and
- Do the work to revitalise a forest, *A Forest for Australia*.

Through research and pedagogical practices across universities – our allegiance is to the consortia. We are attempting to map an ecology of collaboration against the backdrop of COVID-19 and all its challenges. Thinking with Haraway (1991) – how do we construct a cyborgian consortia robust enough to transcend or transform institutional divides?

By using public art as a fulcrum to transmit and understand knowledge in multiple ways. To consider ourselves, in Nato Thomson's words, as 'ever-malleable potentialities' (2015, 131), beings with tendencies that transcend coded meaning, prone to re-combination in infinite ways. There is a danger however that in declaring ourselves and our project cyborgian, that it can unwittingly be plugged back into a dividuating and exploitative capitalist machine. Fiona Hillary recently got her PhD, a PhD anchored in research undertaken at the Western Treatment Plant, a great thing for a CV, and for the

next round of promotions at RMIT. All power to Fiona. The PhD was of course shaped by the bio-luminescent dinoflagellates she was working with, as much as any advice the supervisors gave her. The PhD was shaped by the milieu: the smell, the firmament, the tides, the dawn conversations with cinematographers, the light, the sound, the crows, the architecture, the reading, reflection, writing and the alien infrastructure. This was a post-studio collaboration.



Figure 3: Fiona Hillary 2021 *Reverberating Futures* Iteration 1, Australasian Science, Technology & Society Network 2021, Mission to Seafarers Melbourne, Australia. Image 1: Giles Campbell Wright, Image 2: Fiona Hillary.

We invoke decentering practices and affirmative ethics – creating generative approaches to cross-institutional collaboration (Braidotti 2019).

We stand with Loveless when she states:

I mobilise research – creation as a mode of resistance to individualist, careerist, and bibliometric university cultures. Research – creation, on this reading, is a potent pedagogical method of resistance within a university landscape that, in the wake of Bill Readings's (1997) canonical 'university of excellence,' has emerged as the enduringly neoliberal 'university of business' or the 'all-administrative university' (Ginsberg 2011) (Loveless 2019, 9).

Even as art projects like Treatment, and its associated PhDs, ask the artist to, in Josephine Berry's words, 'abandon the studio, the museum, and even materiality ... in an attempt ... to reconnect art to everyday life' we are wary of giving up too much ground (2019, 51). We feel like artists inside and outside the academy are used as neo-liberal bulwarks in creating spaces of exploitation – simply because we love our practice and

exemplify new modes of labour in it. As universities use the current state of exception, the artist's methods and emotional ties to making, against us, our notion of the post-studio is not to be used reductively, to invent algorithms that apply staff/student ratios to how large and often used spaces are.

We are re-crafting a traditionally competitive landscape to understand what transpires when we shift from competition to consortia; thinking with Braidotti, we ask who and what we are in the process of becoming (Braidotti 2019, 2). We are creating the foundations for new ways of working in this neo-liberal landscape. Born of interdisciplinarity – we extend our ways of practising into the structure of how we see the competitive nature of this landscape. We assemble research-creation in a collaborative landscape.

For sure we're trying to extinguish the author again, for the thousandth time, to align with new materialist and feminist theory as a cyborgian assemblage that limits the excesses of propertied individualism and the research points, back slaps and first authorships that come with it. It's a monstrous mash-up that not only attempts to subvert the academic systems to which we are bound, but also throws open our relations with others, human, non-human, inhuman, one and all, in an attempt to resist and redistribute the sensible (Ranciere, 2010).

Bureaucracies don't always cope well with that, with a tendency to over-determine the spaces in which artists work. Councils, universities, various disciplines, private organisations, community groups and other stakeholders superimpose onto spaces their own logics of control, but what we propose is a project that haunts a world fueled by spectacle, a world increasingly threatened by the real and its feedback.

We have to attune ourselves to our waste, which is something these projects in these places, and Nicholas Bourriard, ask us to do. It's an orientation we must accept in the coming decades, to be attuned to the supposed unproductive and unprofitable (Bourriard, 2016) – if it's the creative arts in the university, the bio-solid hills at the Western Treatment Plant made from materials that have literally passed through us all and that won't break down, or the hidden spectacle of Denes' work at Greater Western Water.

The proposed coalition affords us a space in between institutions, a zone that Bourriard might accept as 'exformal: a site where border negotiations unfold between what is rejected and what is admitted, products and waste'. We can have our cake and eat it too. As we are rejected by the academy we indulge a form that takes shape in the interstices, a public art project that is best described as an exform, 'constituting a link between the aesthetic and the political... (Bourriard, 2016, x)'.

Our collective programs in the university draw across disciplines bringing together artists, curators, designers, communication specialists, and already lay the model for consortia. How can we consort to better attune to the landscape of climate change? How will our consortia contribute new knowledge around the care of an existing artwork created with a legacy?



Figure 4: Agnes Denes, 1998, *A Forest for Australia*, Altona, Australia. Photographs: Fiona Hillary.

Perhaps this project becomes the legacy of Denes' work – as we each turn our interest to the Forest for the People. We the people navigate our institutional bounds, looking for the cracks that let the light in, offering new ways from with-in our institutions. We are seeking more than disciplinary ways we can forge a research landscape that is viable, engaging and fulfilling.

We already work to argue the value of art as research – I am positioning my relational reasoning to expand into the cross-institutional consortia – more than ever, we need re-newable ways of working.

This speculative manifesto combines the values of our institutions, read in no particular order as follows:

We Read Together:

'valuing the wellbeing of our people and our place, now and into the future'

Passion

respectful

Dynamic

community driven and focused

Sustainable

trusted and reliable

Ethical

recognised

Excellent

bold and Innovative

Brave

Inclusive

accountable and transparent

efficient and responsible

Imagination

Agility

Courage

Impact

This is the beginning of courageous consortia.

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