



The importance of asking the 'right' questions: considering issues of interpretation in art-as-research

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Before we had words  
for thoughts and feelings  
we had looks and gestures,  
immediate, unclouded  
by context or connotation.  
Almost lost in words,  
that immediacy remains;  
too deep a glance,  
or a glance averted,  
can leave us speechless,  
coveting that unlanguage clarity.

(Zitner 2002, 10)

This work by Canadian poet and scholar S.P. Zitner 1 for his daughter begins my exploration of interpretation in art as research. I chose this poem for its evocative expression of the longing that I believe we all feel, as artists, as researchers, for that perfect interpretation, that exquisitely attuned interpreter. We wish for an experiencing consciousness that connects with our work in full congruence with our own understanding of it - just as the father and infant of S.P. Zitner's poem coexist in a kind of ideal symbiosis.

But beyond infancy - or perhaps beyond that first blush of parental bliss - we soon discover that such a perfect interpretive connection doesn't exist. Life experience demonstrates that 'unlanguage clarity' becomes inflected with divergent experiences, idiosyncratic expectations, and unanticipated desires. This is especially true when the interpreter is someone other than ourselves, but can be just as true in our relation to our own work. Such is both the problem and the pleasure of interpretation.

There are compensations, of course, for the loss of the clarity we enjoy through psychic fusion. Many of us come to value the individual differences that emerge in any interpretative process as fundamentally important to the creation of dialogue, learning, respect for differences, and growth. And so we see interpretation as - in the words of philosopher Gianni Vattimo -

not a description by an 'impartial' observer, but a dialogic event, which the talkers participate in equally and which they leave changed; they understand each other to the extent they are both included in the third horizon, which belongs to neither, but where they have been placed and which puts them in their place" (quoted in Hannula, 2002, p. 75).

This notion of interpretation describes a meaning-making process but is not, perhaps, fully evocative of the nature of interpretation itself. For that, I turn to Anders Pettersson's typology of interpretation: five kinds, including an approach oriented to ordinary reading or viewing of works of art with the aim of reconstruction and assimilation and another focused on scholarly or critical explication whose aims might be retrieval of intention, structural analysis, or explication of focal aspects (2003a, pp. 54-81; 2003b, p. 22).

I will return to this topic of interpretation in a moment, but first I will describe the form of my text, which is less a resolved thesis, proven and distilled, than a teasing out of an emergent idea. This essay takes a 'research/creation' approach to questions of interpretation in art-as-research, exploring the topic from personal, poetic, theoretical, and contextual standpoints, proposing not to 'solve' the problem, but rather to 'surround it' - a distinction articulated by Gloria Steinem in a radio interview, and applied by theorist Graeme Sullivan to the approach of artist/researchers in the studio (2004, p. 806). In other words, in practice-led research such as mine, a question may not yield a definitive single answer, but rather through a collection of ideas and images, suggest possibilities for further engagement. In the spirit of feminist scientist Donna Haraway's 'modest witness,'<sup>2</sup> what I offer here is formative research about the problem of interpretation in art-as-research<sup>3</sup> as I see it at this current moment from my particular standpoint.

About the latter I will be brief. I am a Canadian visual artist and scholar with an interdisciplinary bent. After some years teaching in Toronto within York University's Faculty of Education and the Ontario College of Art and Design's Faculty of Art, in July 2008 I was appointed assistant professor of art education in the Faculty of Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal. There, I work with graduate and undergraduate artists and teachers on aspects of theory and practice and of course conduct my own research, practice-led research in particular.

I have one degree in education and two in studio arts, with my preferred visual approach being collage. By collage I mean the deliberate bringing together of two or more previously independent elements in any medium or form, not necessarily a visual work of cut paper and glue. This essay is a fragment towards a collage of art objects and texts built on theories and practices from multiple disciplines. What I am offering today is an aspect of the methodological strand of my current inquiry, *Mariposa*, about the cultural anthropology of the butterfly image.

My earliest academic work was in English literature and art history. In fact, S.P. Zitner, whose poem begins this essay, was my Shakespeare professor a long while ago at the University of Toronto. My approach to questions such as that of the problem of interpretation in fact owes a great deal to Professor Zitner. During one class, he asked our group of second-year undergraduates a question that changed the way I think about

questions - in research, in scholarship, in art. Speaking of Hamlet and the various ways that we might approach the text, Professor Zitner asserted, "The question is not why Hamlet delays in revenging his father's death, but rather why Shakespeare shows us that delay." That distinction stopped me in my tracks. I was being urged in my interpretation to take a step back from engagement with the lived reality of the play's action to consideration of the meta-level of intentionality and cultural discourse (or in Pettersson's terms, to move from an 'ordinary' level of interpretation to a 'scholarly' or 'critical' one). At a time when I was young, and a new world of ideas was opening up to me, Professor Zitner encouraged me to think differently not just about art, but also about inquiry itself.

In my current context, in the relatively new world of art-as-research, Professor Zitner's words encourage me to think differently about inquiry into interpretation. The "Research Into Practice" Conference's call for submissions suggested that scholars/artists might entertain a wide variety of important questions about interpretation: "Are unambiguous research outputs in the arts possible or desirable?" "Are the problems of interpretation in the arts different from other disciplines?" and "Can anything be learned from studies of interpretation in other humanities subjects?" - to list just a few. As I endeavoured to discover where I connected with these questions or might formulate another, my mind turned to Professor Zitner's approach to Hamlet's delay and I thought to take a step back. I aimed to move myself from the level of ordinary (if scholarly) engagement with notions of interpretation in art-as-research, to critical conceptualizations of the question of interpretation itself. That is to say, I wondered how I might interpret our current preoccupation with art-as-research, and what this preoccupation might suggest about interpretation within this domain of practice and study. These latter, for me, are the 'right' questions to begin my inquiry into interpretation, and so the ones that I will address here.

So, why art-as-research? Why now? One response would be to offer the zeitgeist argument, to say that art-as-research has become a subject of our discourse in Western society now because such is the spirit of our age. One could see a connection to what education theorist Elliot Eisner so aptly sums up as "the deliteralization of knowledge" (2008, p. 5) and an increasing acceptance of pluralistic approaches to its representations, perhaps as a result of global migrations and the influences of theories of feminism and postcolonialism on the construction of knowledge. 4 Bolstering this 'spirit of the age' rationale could be the argument that our society is increasingly oriented to credentials, generating more and more academic certifications including new doctoral degrees in studio practice, and so valorizing new modes of thinking to sustain these. 5

I was indeed tempted to make a version of this argument until I reacquainted myself with "Art and Scholarship," an essay by Ernst Gombrich, as it happens, a favourite scholar of Professor Zitner's. Gombrich stresses the limitations of the zeitgeist approach, which he calls the "circular argument" of finding the origins of the style of the art of an era in the spirit of the era (1978, p. 114). He compares such an approach to a pharmacist's finding that the soporific qualities of opium reside in its sleep-inducing properties! Gombrich comments that the first step away from the trap to this circular argument, is admitting ignorance, acknowledging that "I don't know" how a style comes to be.

He then suggests taking up a spiraling approach, proposing that a scholar work back and forth between the general and the particular, between a theory of the age and the art object or experience that is of the age. He comments, "The paradox... seems to me precisely that the cherished particular can only be approached by a spiraling path through the labyrinth of general theories, and that these theories can be mapped out only by those who have reached the particular" (1978, p. 110). In the face of this paradox, we as

scholars and artists can and should, according to Gombrich, "attempt to draw in new evidence from ever-widening circles, which may offer new vistas on the particular" (1978, p. 117).

It seems to me that this deliberate working back and forth between the general or theoretical and the particular is precisely the approach of practice-led research. I would now like to be able to offer you something 'particular' of my own, in which the generalities of which I have been speaking are embedded. As it happens, my new series of practice-led research is still in development; however, my most recently completed body of work, Finding home - the multi-modal (visual art, illustrated text, and digital documentation) collage project that comprised my PhD dissertation - also embodies these ideas and can be accessed via my website (Vaughan, 2007).<sup>6</sup> However, perhaps most relevant to the immediate discussion is information about the framework within which I engage in practice-led research.

In my Canadian context, practice-led research often goes by the name of "research/creation," a term developed by our major federal funding body for university-based scholarly inquiry, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council or SSHRC. SSHRC uses the term research/creation to describe research:

...that forms an essential part of a creative process or artistic discipline and that directly fosters the creation of literary/artistic works. The research must address clear research questions, offer theoretical contextualization within the relevant field or fields of literary/artistic inquiry, and present a well-considered methodological approach. Both the research and the resulting literary/artistic works must meet peer standards of excellence and be suitable for publication, public performance or viewing. (SSHRC, 2005)

I believe that Gombrich would have liked our research/creation approach, whose emphasis on both generalities and particulars is in line not only with his notion of the spiral but also with his urging that artists be historians, and learn from the example of academic scholarship "that boldness alone is not yet exploration unless it is coupled with a critical sense" (p. 118). But pace Gombrich, I am going to be a little bit bold here. If it is true that we are not well able to describe why we are now concerned with art-as-research, perhaps that may be because we simply don't yet know what this artwork of our age is. And if we don't yet know, if we can't yet interpret art-as-research's origins and meanings, could that be because what we're seeing something new? Something unfamiliar? Could we perhaps be seeing the birth of a new form of art, one that might represent as remarkable a shift from the art we know as did, at their own times, the revolutionary creations of ancient Greece and the European renaissance? As did the early twentieth century artworks based in mass communication and mechanical reproduction?

Of course, artists and researchers often consider that the work of their time breaks with what came before: I am reminded of the words of Paul Valéry (written in 1931) with which Walter Benjamin opened his unforgettable essay on "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction:"

Our fine arts were developed, their types and uses were established, in times very different from the present, by men whose power of action upon things was insignificant in comparison with ours... In all the arts there is a physical component which can no longer be considered or treated as it used to be, which cannot remain unaffected by our modern knowledge and power. For the last twenty years neither matter nor space nor time has been what it was from time immemorial. We must expect great innovations to transform

the entire technique of the arts, thereby affecting artistic invention itself and perhaps even bringing about an amazing change in our very notion of art. (1964, p. 225).

Today, too, almost 80 years after Valéry's statement, many scholars and artists are suggesting that current, Western-based art and thought are experiencing amazing changes, moving beyond postmodernism into a new version of representation and expression. For instance, anthropologist Paul Rabinow characterizes this moment as the "contemporary", stating that by deliberately recuperating historical practices when and if required, "the contemporary artist does not repudiate [modernist practices of] shock or historical erasure in an outright or aprioristic manner. Rather, a practitioner taking up a contemporary stance is perplexed about how to treat representation, affect, and reference" (2008, p. 108). Feminist theorist Rosi Braidotti is one of those who uses the term "post-post-modernism," her formulation grounded in a post-secular feminism, a love of the world, and the recognition of the nomadic subjectivity of artists and art viewers (2005). This concept of nomadic subjectivity would resonate with Tate Modern curator Nicholas Bourriaud, who in an interview recently posted on the Museum's website offers a preliminary characterization of several thematics of what he calls the "altermodern," thematics including exile, travel, and borders - all to be in evidence in work shown in the fourth Tate Triennial (February 3 - April 26, 2009), which he is curating.

For myself at this juncture, I don't believe that this new art resides exclusively in questions of content - in thematics such as exile and borders - or in style, in attitudes such as perplexity about how to treat representation or affect. Surely a new kind of art can't depend on the form given the object or experience: a new art for our diverse world would want to embrace a variety of visual and performative approaches, from panel painting, digital video projections, and musical improvisation, to literary collage and interactive dance, just to name a few options. But content, style, and form together with considerations of context and interpretation - perhaps it is a phenomenological mix of these factors together that can make something new, the living, changeable thing that I and others have been calling art-as-research.

I am not sure - 'I do not know' - but I am asking this question - just as I am asking what this might mean for considerations of interpretation. If what we are seeing is actually the birth of a new conception or rendering of art from within a new cultural consciousness, then perhaps we can correspondingly anticipate a new paradigm for interpretation, one that construes from within the worldview that we are working towards. If so, then our work of the moment may be to struggle as hard as we can towards a new vision of interpretation, exploring all the options presented at the Research Into Practice conference, the five types proposed by Anders Pettersson, and others' notions, too, while admitting that we just don't yet know what 'new' interpretation might be. In my mind, then, the right questions to ask include all those on the conference agenda, plus also, could this be a whole new understanding of art that I am seeing? And if so, how would I know? What tools, what theories, what imaginings will I use to interpret the newness of what I discern?

I will close with a final anecdote about Professor Zitner. The last time I saw him was by chance, as we traveled in opposite directions on the escalators of the Robarts Library at the University of Toronto. These escalators don't run parallel to each other; rather, they form an "X", meeting and passing each other at a midpoint between floors. There, we had time only for a few quick words. Riding down, he pointed to the large bound volume I carried on my way up into the stacks and asked what I was reading. "It's my sketchbook," I answered, flipping open a display of pages of rough notes and drawings. "Oh," he drawled,

uninflected, "I thought it was something important." And then he was gone. We had no time to elaborate.

How do I interpret that remark? Do I take it at face value, that he appreciated the sketchbook as 'something important'? Or do I consider that he was being sarcastic, as he could often be, not suffering foolish undergrads gladly, and infer that he actually didn't consider a book of my rough work to be of comparable importance to, say, all the published volumes on that huge library's shelves? Am I tempted to believe he was being generous, knowing as I do that he loved the visual arts, authored many poems about painting, and once mentioned to me that he thought he would have been happier working in art history than English literature? Yes. 7

Sheldon Zitner wrote the following lines to conclude a poem based on the Carpaccio's painting of 1493, *The Hunt on the Lagoon*. After describing the depicted scene's particular details, he generalized back to all of us, in our interpretive humanity. He wrote:

...we invent the world we love,  
and like the painter's eyes, our own  
persuade the hard, discrete details  
of sky and men and birds  
to surrender to a luminous belonging. (2005, 89-90)

So perhaps in this interpretive act, of asking what I consider to be the right questions of, "could our preoccupation with art-as-research be the sign of something new? How would we know?" I am inventing the world I love. In this world, art-as-research revitalizes our ways of being in, representing, and interpreting our realities in a manner that we are barely beginning to understand, but that, I hope, brings us closer to each other in understanding, respect, and joy.

## Endnotes

1 Sheldon P. Zitner was born in New York City on April 20, 1924, died in Toronto on April 26, 2005. In 1969, he began teaching English literature at Trinity College, University of Toronto. For his exemplary teaching through multiple decades, Trinity awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Sacred Letters. His final collection of poetry, which includes the poem that closes this paper, was published posthumously.

2 Haraway's formulation of the "modest witness" - specifically the "mutated modest witness" (1999, p. 267) - is adapted from the work of 17th century chemist Robert Boyle, who invoked the concept of "modest witness" to establish the contours of objectivity within scientific experimental methods and writings, updated with our own contemporary conceptions of knowledge. The 'mutation', then, consists in including the subjectivity, the specific situatedness of the 'modest witness,' complete with identification of his or her partial visions and vested interests as an element in the inquiry.

3 Throughout this paper I use the formulation of art-as-research deliberately, as a way to link a research orientation and context to an art-making practice, denoting an engagement

that exists within the arts. I offer this in collegial conversation with the work of Sven-Olav Wallenstein, who considers that 'art as research' subsumes art within research and so proposes instead his own formulation of 'art and research': which focuses "on the uncertain and open that is included in the and which binds together these two orientations" (2002, p. 44-45). Unlike Wallenstein, I don't see the subjugation within the "as" formulation. However, I do believe that discussions about these various namings and interpretations of our practices are highly worthwhile.

4 The bibliographies on these subjects are extensive. Seminal texts include Lorraine Code's *What can she know? Feminist theory and the construction of knowledge* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991); Gayatri Spivak's *A critique of postcolonial reason: Towards a history of the vanishing present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); and Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996).

5 Here in Canada, while we lag behind UK and Australia/New Zealand practice-led research initiatives by about a decade, the francophone Université de Québec à Montréal has since 1997 offered an interdisciplinary doctorate in art study and practices ([http://www.unites.uqam.ca/doctorat\\_arts/presentation.htm](http://www.unites.uqam.ca/doctorat_arts/presentation.htm)). The English-language stream of studies is more recent: we have just seen the launch of two new PhD programs with a studio practice component. The Faculty of Fine Arts at York University in Toronto has created a studio-based PhD in Visual Arts, with its first intake of students in the fall of 2008 (<http://www.yorku.ca/gradvisa/phd.htm>); the University of Western Ontario launched a PhD in Art and Visual Culture in 2007, the program spanning studio practice and historical inquiry ([http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/html/prog\\_phd\\_base.html](http://www.uwo.ca/visarts/html/prog_phd_base.html)). A similar program has just been announced in the U.S., at the University of California at San Diego, where the new PhD in Art History, Theory and Criticism includes an "Art Practice" concentration for artists with a developed practice and research sensibility (<http://visarts.ucsd.edu/title/grad-phd>).

6 My current work, *Mariposa*, is an interdisciplinary inquiry into the cultural anthropology of butterflies, using photography, textiles, sculpture, installation, and related texts to explore issues of zoology, environmentalism, cultural studies and globalization, ethics of relation, visual culture and contemporary aesthetics. My most recently completed body of practice-led research, *Finding Home* (2006), explores how a person can develop a feeling of being 'at home' in the world and the role that the creative work of collage can play in that process. An interdisciplinary engagement with art theory and practice, environmental education, urban and cultural theory, ethics and aesthetics, as well as notions of memoir, *Finding Home* interweaves large scale charcoal drawings, textile maps and sculptures, archival and contemporary photographs, digital collages, with illustrated text. A video tour of the installation of the work at a local Toronto exhibition site is available at my website, [www.akaredhanded.com/kv-dissertation.html](http://www.akaredhanded.com/kv-dissertation.html).

7 In proposing this possible interpretation of Professor Zitner's remarks, I am aiming to 'retrieve representational intentions' - one of the typologies of interpretation proposed by Anders Pettersson (2003a, p. 63). In other words, I am working to understand and elucidate what the speaker aimed to convey.

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