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Arts-based research sharing and disability culture methods: different ways of knowing

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In this mosaic, three of us assemble writings about an international arts-based research symposium, Disability/Culture: New Grounds (The University of Michigan Initiative on Disability Studies Conference, February 2015). We are: organising team member and gender studies scholar Beth Currans; participant, workshop leader and poet/dancer Stephanie Heit; and symposium director and performance studies scholar/artist Petra Kupperts. What are we gaining from this kind of work, what are the issues we are taking forward, how does sharing arts-based knowledge work on us and for us? How does evaluation and critical academic method intersect with community values and being together?

This was the seventh symposium organised by Petra Kupperts with various collaborators, following on from annual week-long events like Native Women Language Keepers (2013), Somatics, Movement and Writing (2011), and Touching Time: Bodies/Writing/Histories (2008). The event series brings together international artists, academics and activists to share their arts-based research, without traditional papers – we share the heart of our work through workshops, using experiential methods to experience the excitement and passion of our research.

This witnessing mosaic holds traces of our working methods: our writings focus not on synthesis and analysis, but on poetic insight, echoes, layerings, assemblages. We offer three voices, in friendship with one another, meditating on what became important to us, in our respective complex places in art, academia, and community activism.

Stephanie Heit

We gather in the studio for the opening circle the afternoon of the first day of the symposium. Varied distances travelled to reach this point together. Australia. Canada. Kansas. Colorado. New Mexico. Illinois. Transportation feats of arrival after Michigan had its largest snowstorm of the season. Sidewalk paths carved through steep slopes of snow.

Outside the studio, the journalist questions of who are you, what university, what do you do. The kind of questions that irk me since I don't have the expected boxes to check: I'm not affiliated with a university and don't have a paying job. Inside the studio space I'm relieved to connect in unexpected ways. Petra begins with honouring the

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Ojibwe people whose land we are on. She pays respect to the space holding us throughout the week.

We are in a circle. Each of us share our river, our mountain, our people. There are hand gestures in smooth swoops to describe water lived near or of import at a specific life point, shifts in body language to surrender, softening of chest as tribes/communities are articulated with a common theme of folks who don't fit the norm.

Next round: Give thanks to someone. I speak of my late grandfather who taught me how to garden and told stories of impossibility presented as truth. Sisters, aunts, friends are brought into the space making our connections through past into present. A lineage of experience with deepening lines as we get used to each other's ways of speaking through voice, body, texture of breath, gesture tempo.

Express gratitude to someone that helped you today. Bree Hadley thanks the building desk manager who kept her entertained while waiting for a long overdue taxi. Rebecca Taussig is grateful for the man who went somewhere in the airport to personally retrieve her seemingly lost wheelchair.

It feels good to move and shift weight and focus while learning a bit about each other. Not stiff or formal. An invitation to play. To take time and experience ease as the inside is welcomed outside and the outside has various options for how to be in this space together and alone. Touching. Not touching. The spaces between us activated and ripe. Container created as membrane: flexible, permeable, strong, fragile. We will hold and be held and let string zip through our fingers and words inventory our hearts and minds this next four days (Figure 1).

Petra Kuppers

On the second day of the symposium, Stephanie Heit is leading us in a Contemplative Movement Session. After a sitting meditation, and a short personal exploration time,



Figure 1. Opening circle, with projected image of Back to Back Theatre, Bree Hadley's talk.

it's Open Space: the wildness of the open space of the studio, stretching in all dimensions. The space is demarcated by the widely spaced circle we are holding for each other.

We bow to enter and exit this vastness, acknowledging the limit of the exploratory play in the middle of the round, upward and down, onward in time.

In Open Space, encounters happen. My personal time includes wheeling to most of the fellows of the symposium, greeting them bodily through mirroring and connecting, engaging my contact improvisation muscles to find another way of welcoming them into my space and into my sensorium.

Beth Currans

I arrived late on the second day of the symposium, during Stephanie Heit's Contemplative Dance workshop. I hung my coat, removed my boots, and entered the low-lit space. Pillows, a few notebooks, and a cloth covered in yarn and embroidery thread formed a circle around 10 or so people moving together in an unscripted way – weaving in and out of each other's orbits, balancing on one or two limbs, spinning on wheels and feet, greeting each other with their eyes, touching lightly when invited.

I joined a few other people already propped on pillows and watched, gauging my own rhythm, my own openness. Two participants softly invited me to enter the circle if I desired. One dancer stopped, moved down from her chair and joined another participant in the circle in order to audio describe the process to him. I remained on the pillows, watching, still checking in with my body and mind. Soon, the facilitator requested that the dancers return to the ring. We all sat together in the calm, open space to close the first workshop.

This was my entry into the symposium at the University of Michigan. Months prior, I had read through the fellowship applications [we have a call for proposals, and selected participant fellows receive \$500 to attend the event], submitted my rankings, and looked at the final list with anticipation. Then my life took its own course – teaching classes, meeting with students and colleagues, engaging in bureaucratic processes, attending conferences, grading papers, writing papers, sharing drinks and meals with friends. Then here I was, in this island of calm. I slowed down and moved into this other space.

Petra Koppers

In Open Space improvisations, new layerings of interpersonal knowing can occur, as people reveal themselves in new patterns. Without verbal self-presentation, the nature of our guests appear in a new form, their elegance and beauty unfolding itself in response to the stimuli and the length of time offered, the acknowledgment that no particular intervention is necessary, and that a rest on the floor is enough, too. I can get to know my partner's particularities: trembles, the nature of someone's spasticity, play in the visual field of people with alternative sensory access, the energies of intimacy and how far someone wishes to have others enter into their personal sphere.

These moments of symposium improvisation hold great value, I believe, because of their difference from the verbal register. They cannot supplant the verbal, and the critical axes we can offer each other in dialogic engagement, but they can gesture towards the other categories of knowledge, the ones so often denigrated or only alluded to in the usual conference format. A conference paper does not usually have moments of blossoming when the energy fields of two hands meet. But a conference paper can abstract the knowledge created in the encounter, and transfer it to others who are not in the room with us. These are the challenging poles of art-based research practice: how to scale up, how to translate, how to hand on knowledges without direct transmission.

Community-based arts-based research faces these dilemmas even more urgently, as the art practices at the heart of the work have so little visibility in the wider circulation of art.

So our symposia are exploratory fields for new academias/art-fields. I realise that some people find it challenging to articulate what exactly the value of this Open Space may be, if they can't quite grasp how to put what happens into words. As a curator, I need to rely on the affective realm of bodily transmissions, on the energetic blip that happens when one bows into space, and out again, and encounters another in happy or sad play. And I need to rely on the discursive realm that frames our symposia: the papers we exchange beforehand, the writings that might or might not occur afterward, the slight shifts in perspectives occasioned by moments that happen as we dance past each other.

Beth Currans articulates this shift as a time signature. In the rushing flow of the semester, she can find a moment of calmness in the Open Space, and in the arches of blackness, in the cavern of the Duderstadt Video Studio, the soft pillows, the gentle forms of engagement we offer each other there.

These features of the symposia emerge from a disability culture sensitivity. These features include taking time, calm non-rushed engagement, long breaks to allow for good transitions (usually 30 minutes in between 1 hour or 1.5 hour long workshops, and often a 2 hour lunch slot), and multi-sensory doubling, with sound or light reinforcing verbal messages. In the public sharings of the symposium, the keynote/keyworkshop, we utilise CART, real-time captioning, as a way of marking the crip nature of our space, even if no-one in particular has requested this particular form of accommodation. We also build audio description into sessions, often by offering it spontaneously to one another, as a layer in the artful field we are co-creating. A computer stands by as a site to verbally engage without eye-contact or speaking – what is typed into the laptop appears on a screen that is part of the circle, even if someone does not wish to be in the circle themselves. Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi's fabric station offers another refuge: sit here, take up sewing material, and finger knit as a way of staying energetically connected to the central circle's flow without rolling in it yourself. This is an invitation I took up a number of times during the symposium, as the repetitive nature of the knitting and crocheting calmed my nervous system, and soothed my tiredness.

Our symposium knowledge production is supported by disability culture rules: it's ok to step out, to rest, it's ok to be intermittently present, it's ok to engage in a slanted way, and it is ok to ask for assistance in leading something, or in experimenting. One can be a fellow at the symposium and not offer a workshop. It's ok to learn and be valued for one's presence, rather than one's product (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Contemplative movement workshop.

Beth Currans

As part of a workshop about disability counternarratives led by Maricela DeMirjyn, I shared experiences with two other participants. These counternarratives required reaching into places of hurt, joy, and lack. Our conversation moved from vibrant dance parties to heteropatriarchal narratives of achievement to ways to see fat bodies as sexy. When I admitted not knowing how to write the counternarrative I wanted to write, one interlocutor asked ‘How can we help you?’ This question, itself a counternarrative, shifted the space, created an opening for me to move into. The question served its purpose as I settled in a bit more. I didn’t need to know the answer (and I didn’t, couldn’t, at least not in verbal form). This offer both responded to the space established by Petra as symposium director and expanded it. Our conversation moved towards this dynamic exchange between curation of spaces and participant engagement. Spaces of engagement, we determined, needed both.

Just as the dance parties one of my interlocutors described were a co-creation of the curators and participants, so was this symposium. Petra reserved a physical space for us. The team scheduled it so that we would have time to do specific things – lead and participate in workshops, perform and watch performances, share meals and conversations, and take breaks if needed. Then we entered that physical and affective space and shaped it, gave it contours and tones through our claiming of it. As we sat on pillows and chairs, some with wheels, some with feet, and moved with and around each other we made the space our own. Certain limits were set – the techs needed breaks and needed to go home in the evenings at a set time; no food

allowed in the video studio, although there was a table of snacks, water, and coffee just outside; touch was fine but only with permission; different ways of engaging needed to be respected – and within them we opened into the space and retreated when needed. As we slowly wove ourselves into the fabric of the symposium, we also created possibilities for unraveling. These bumps, holes, and frayed edges were part of the beauty of the fabric we knitted together.

I frequently think about how people can claim and transform spaces. I generally see limits, especially those set by people with formal and informal power, as barriers to overcome. Thinking about spaces as curated helps shift the rigid binary of that framework. Many limits set on citizen uses of public space are designed to maintain existing power relations; nonetheless, other ways of inhabiting spaces do need parameters to help set up productive ways to engage each other. This may be especially true given the numerous formal and informal rules about how people can be in public spaces. When opportunities for self-governance are offered in a culture where they are so often constrained, loose scripts provide flexible modes for encounter and engagement.

Stephanie Heit

On the Yarning Session led by three Chicago-based participants, Chun-Shan (Sandie) Yi, with Cheryl Kaplan Zachariah and Ryan Parrey, on day three of the symposium.

Enter the Duderstadt studio and black box possibility. Caffeinated greetings and sleep inquiries. We huddle imperfect circle near skeins of thread. Thick and thin twines of wool perhaps cotton. Colors rust, natural, orange, muted pink, brown. I pick one out and join my smaller group to share tellable secrets. We are three. Rebecca wants to stay in her wheelchair but feels far away from us on the ground. I get some other chairs so we are all on the same level. While Hyunjoo Yoo speaks I wind thread gently around her back. Each of us is warp and weft with eye focus on strands and strings. While listening we move in repetitive motion.

When I share I take the thick yarn and wrap it around and around my wrist feeling the tension as comfort to words that spill in this climate of connection. My tears I predict come steady. I speak of love and future in its fear and joy. How six months ago *future* was not part of my vocabulary. How during years of severe bipolar illness, time was something I'd learned to survive in small present tense increments.

The mourning and singing as I circle my wrist and Rebecca casts a loop around me. Slowly the smaller groups migrate and join together into a spinning circle with skeins lofted in the air tossed to someone who needs it or wants it or haphazard receives these threads. We entangle our bodies. Some yarn intricate knots and crochet. The tapestry we create breathes with us as we shift weight. Cheryl unwinds herself to greet and invite new arrivals. Sandie next to me uses her hands like a shuttle in constant circle motions. I remove my socks and expose my feet and toes as loom. Permission asked and consent or not to string an arm or leg to wrap a torso.

We are weavers, spiders spinning. Words and silences. Tenacity of fibers like antennas we get silent, and I feel my body hone connection. The vibration of movement like tendrils through our creation. Cecilia Vicuña and quipu. Language of knots. Spinning a yarn. Yarning. Feminism grandmother spider. This is a world we make. This fine web. Phones are gathered and pictures taken to cast the thread further. My body relaxed and comfortable with the grid-like pattern of thread and brilliant spaces between

holding light and breath. Our bodies intricate in the creation. No one lets go. When it is time to shift we gently untangle ourselves, alter tension to hold the shape. One line needs to be cut as it is wrapped around Rebecca's wheelchair making it immobile. Slowly we transfer the weaving to a group of chairs. Later with tech support it is attached to a boom and lights and hangs in the corner like a woven mystery holding secrets and connections (Figure 3).

Petra Koppers

At the end of our symposia, it's often hard to hold on to what exactly happened. Something shifts in me, and I feel nourished by the engagements that occur, but something in me also usually feels like it wants more: often more critical engagement, more distance, more critique.

And yet, I know that this longing is marked by the pressure towards these modalities in more or less all of my other social knowledge spaces, my usual homes in academia. So I try to acknowledge my longing's presence, but not to worry too much about it.

I use movement improvisation or creative writing to hold on to moments of the symposium: feeling copper in one's blood, in Bronwyn Preece's performance, re-engaging stairs as playground for people with all kinds of ways of traversing space, in Irene Loughlin's workshop, or feeling the weight of the lines in the fabric sculpture. Sense impressions, moments of clarity and experience. Not distance, not so much.



Figure 3. Yarning circle.

Sometimes I wonder: should we get together again, a few weeks later, and enframe our experiences? Should we offer each other development options, additional reading materials, other artists engaged in similar journeys? Some of us do, and we all engage in a small economy of offerings in that way – I have seen emails exchanged, names offered, little love gifts rather than critique sessions.

Open Space – not the formal sets of artistic academic practice. Our symposia mark time: that we can have time together, that we can be together, that we need each other, that we can witness each other without too much judgment, without clear development lines. Academia is a community, of course, with its own rules, rituals and behavioural practices. All conference organisers do know that, when we put out tea and coffee, and chat in the breaks.

Our arts-based symposia push this boat out a bit further, and call for community values over academic evaluative values, providing a different kind of nourishment, where the evaluative encounters happen in the off-spaces, and we feed each other on stage.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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