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**Nurturing the research spirit: Narratives of “being and becoming” – confessions of a Generation X-er**

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*I was born between the era of the Baby Boomers (1946 - 64) and Generation Y (born after 1976). The intervening generation, known as Generation X, is described as being made up of ‘cynical, hopeless, frustrated and unmotivated slackers who wear grunge clothing, listen to alternative music and still live at home because they cannot get real jobs’ (Jochim, 2006). I am a fairly positive person, try to wear reasonable clothing, like listening to Fleetwood Mac, left home when I was seventeen, and have paid taxes for all of my working life. Superficial classifications that ignore subtle but important differences are also applied within and across research disciplines. As an academic located in a Faculty of Education whose research is concerned with the creative arts I experience the dilemmas that arise from others’ perceptions and often, superficial classifications of what constitutes research in this area. In this paper I explore my being and becoming as a researcher, and interrogate the dichotomies that form the basis of my research: male/female, art/craft, public/private, and reason/creativity, which have often evoked in other people the type of stereotyping described above.*

I distinctly remember the first art competition I ever won. It was in Grade 1 and we were asked to draw a picture to win tickets to the local show. I worked very hard on my drawing and tried to think of a ‘different’ angle from what everybody else was drawing. Coming from a rural area the other children drew a variety of animals that they knew would be paraded at the show. I had to be original and creative - my work had to be different. I ended up drawing a clown with a balloon tied around each foot. He was floating over the top of the showgrounds with a big smile on his face, and the crowd was milling around underneath. The first prize was a free family pass to the show. I was most excited when my work was chosen. As we pulled up at the gate on opening day, the man on the gate leaned into the car window and Dad gave him the pass I had won. I then told him very excitedly what I had drawn and about the clown and the people below him. Surprisingly, he seemed to know all about my picture, and didn’t hurry my story, even though there were cars waiting behind us. I remember it was important that he knew about the people in the picture, and as I look back on my career as an artist, and my beginning career as a researcher, I can see that this has been a consistent theme in my work. I want people to understand the story, and to understand the people in my stories. I also want to present a different angle to issues that may not seem to warrant this attention.

It seems a long time ago since that exciting day when my only concern was to make sure that we got to the show before the fireworks started. Currently I am completing a PhD titled *Partnership or Perish? A study of artistic collaborations*. In hindsight, I believe I am still investigating people and the way they relate to one another in the topic I have chosen. It seems like a fairly mundane topic, however I have found that the term ‘collaboration’ is extremely complex and difficult to define, particularly in

reference to the actual process that people engage in. It has slowly become apparent through numerous interviews that the process is much more complicated than I thought, and contingent on a diverse number of factors. I have chosen to concentrate on three case studies: the *Parliament House Embroidery*, which involved each of the State and Territory embroidery guilds of Australia; the Victorian Tapestry Workshop who work with artists and weavers both nationally and internationally; and also an exhibition which I curated of Australian contemporary artists. They were chosen because they have publicly acknowledged that collaborative processes are predominant in their art making. <sup>1</sup> The first hurdle encountered in this research was that I wished to undertake the full written thesis in conjunction with the creative component of the exhibition. I was told that this had not been attempted in the arts faculty before, and that it would be setting a precedent. During the seminars I have had to give at as part of my research, I encountered a supportive yet seemingly bemused audience. They were more accustomed to viewing and discussing images of an artist's work and hearing about the inspiration and challenges within it, not hearing about the breathless reportage of the thrilling chase to obtain an elusive piece of data.

It was also interesting for me to discover as an early career researcher that the issues which arose from my interviews with people engaged in the collaborative process are similar to those which occur in research. They included authorship, ego, time, communication and acknowledgment. These issues have arisen about academic research in discussions with my colleagues. The link to authorship occurred when we pondered whether joint authorship was fairly acknowledged and valued in terms of research points. The relationship to ego was inferred in concerns about whose name was nominated first in a group paper; even though the first author's contribution may have been a cursory reading of the paper. Issues of time arose constantly, and always appear to be of concern at the university level. This occurs when trying to maintain a balance between teaching and research, as quality research output is seen as a mark of productivity. Communication was acknowledged as being an essential element of the research process, particularly between the researcher and the reader. In terms of communication, my colleagues argued that academic jargon is too elitist for most people to read, and therefore less valued in the general community. The issue of acknowledgment was raised, particularly by our research assistants who wondered how they can be fairly acknowledged for the time they have contributed to a research paper, particularly if they have been paid. Did the financial exchange waive their right to being identified in a research paper? They are all complex issues, which are inherent both in the collaborative process and the research paradigm of universities.

Through my research I have discovered that a successful collaboration relies on the positive aspects of human nature to work effectively. Co-operation, compromise, communication and caring are essential for good relationships. Fundamentally this is what collaboration should seek to achieve. It is vital to foster sound relationships between all participants, to acknowledge their contribution, to create space for compromise and to treat people with respect. It is important to recognise that all participants are treated equally and fairly in order to achieve a worthwhile outcome for all of those involved. It is also important to recognise that collaborative groups will be at different stages of development and consequently will have different communication patterns. The relationships among the group's members will change as different expectations and behaviours emerge during their time together. This

awareness within a research environment is essential to encourage greater research outputs.

In our faculty we are dealing with the Baby Boomers (1945 – 64), Generation X (1965 – 1979), and Generation Y (1980 – 1994), while at the same time, trying to assist our pre-service primary and secondary teachers to deal with Generation Z (1995 – 2009). However, as noted earlier, these are superficial classifications. As Matchett (2006) states ‘to argue people united only by age all think the same and share values and aspirations, regardless of their economic circumstances, ethnic identities, and indeed, personal beliefs, takes some proving’ (p. 40). On occasion I also experience this type of stereotyping as a researcher in the creative arts. There is a tension between others’ perceptions of what constitutes research in this area. My research has investigated various dichotomies, which I recognise being an inherent part of creativity. Simonton (1988) states that ‘the capacity for remote associations that can connect disparate ideas’ is an asset to creativity (p. 398). I prefer to investigate areas where there is a blurring of the edges; and where the answer lies somewhere in between the expected and the unexpected. I realise however, that the stereotypical view of research is one of scientific outputs and quantitative data analysis. Some of my colleagues find it difficult to deal with qualitative research, as I do with quantitative research. I will briefly outline my introduction to research and some of the significant moments which occurred during this journey. This will include the perceptions of others during my research journey and how this has influenced my current direction.

My interest in collaboration was a logical extension from my Masters thesis, *The Deconstruction of Domestic Space* (1999). This study investigated the period of the 1950s in Australia, during which creative women diverted or in some cases subverted their creative energies into decorating their homes. Purser and Montuori (1999) describe women’s stereotypical activities around the home as ‘everyday creativity’ which is not valued by society. During this time, I was a mature age student who had recently converted a Master of Fine Arts (MFA) into a Master of Arts (Research) (MA). I would describe this as a signal moment in my research career. I decided that my need to know was greater than my need to make. I also felt that the topic was an area that was worthy of further research, but had not been thoroughly investigated. When fellow artists, who were aghast at my move from fine arts to research, asked why I had taken this course of action I replied “I love to research.” I enjoyed the solitary nature of research, which also attracted me to being an artist. I also relished the different angles I could take to a question and the process of gathering knowledge to bring disparate pieces of information together. I looked forward to the moment when the reader would see how I had guided them through to the clever yet elegantly crafted conclusion. (Well, that was my hope at least!) I had been trained to create visual metaphors and now I was using this knowledge to create written ones.

During the time I was working on my MA, I was awarded a Parliament House Internship to enable me to work through Hansard 2 and other records pertaining to arts policy and development during the 1950s. A few weeks after my application was submitted, the Head of School (Visual Arts) approached me and told me confidentially that he had been contacted by the internship organiser at Parliament House and been asked if my application was a joke. Apparently Parliament House had never before received an application from a student at a visual arts faculty. Although I

was treated suspiciously in the beginning - obviously they knew I was a Generation Xer - it was not long before I was totally immersed in the environment and ensconced in the Parliament House library. I felt like an authentic researcher. Until this point I had mainly worked in the various University libraries and the State library. Now I was able to access the Parliamentary library and wore a special pass to enable me to do so. I was also allowed to attend Question Time. One of the highlights was when I walked into the elevator with the future Premier and the Arts Minister and was asked jokingly whether I was heading off to see the 'blood letting'. I felt that I was being treated as one of the group and they also began to relax in my presence. As a result of my time spent in the library, I believe that my efforts contributed to the elevation of the status of visual arts in the eyes of the committee. Hopefully this interaction also dispelled their initial reticence to allow a visual arts student into their realm. At the conclusion of the internship I presented a copy of my research findings to the committee. It was accepted gracefully and with the required seriousness of acknowledgement that would be given to research disseminated from any other area.

The other important moment for me during 1999 was my acceptance for the artist-in-residence program at Bundanon in NSW. This was the property bequeathed by the Australian artist Arthur Boyd and his wife Yvonne to the Australian people. I was to spend five weeks there during September and October creating work inspired by the landscape. In my proposal I requested access to the archives which held sketchbooks, diaries, artworks and other artefacts related to the Boyd family. In my proposal I stated that I was most interested in investigating the lives of the women in the family. Some of these women had been successful artists, and relinquished their promising career to support their partner to achieve success instead. It was with this aim that I proposed some intensive research time in the archives, which were situated in close proximity to the studios/living area where I would be located. The landscape was breathtaking, and I felt an intense urge to start making straight away, but I knew that I owed these women a thorough understanding of their sacrifice and support, by reading their own words.

During the time at Bundanon I immersed myself in the archives initially to gain a sense of the women's stories, and to find the material to enable me to work on the assemblages I had envisaged. I was not disappointed. Page after page of the diaries revealed the aspirations these women held. Spirited sketches recorded everyday moments brought into sharp relief by the fact that they had been sketched and preserved for such a long time. I was told that nobody had really gone through the archives before, as they had recently arrived from another location. They were housed in a purpose built archive centre, and therefore in professional conservation conditions. The archives were air conditioned and it was quite delightful to be able to read their words, and imagine their connection - in some cases physical, in others spiritual - to the place where I was. Having distilled the experiences as much as I could in such a short time, I began work on five boxed assemblages which were dedicated to each of the women in the Boyd family. Text was used to record various quotes which were resisted onto both sides of the boxes. One side related to the woman's career as an artist, and the other to her life once she was married. The boxes were in reality, quite deep frames which allowed me to suspend and attach various objects inside them. I then wound nylon filament around each of the boxes and wove the surface with clear acetate onto which had been photocopied an image of the artist and one of her artworks. The frames were then encased in clear Perspex sheets, cut to

size, to form a front and back to the box. The effect was a blending which could be seen from either side of the objects, of the text and images, which created a pixelated blur. The boxes reflected the past juxtaposed with the present of the spectacular background of Bundanon which provided a wonderful context for the work.

Up until this point I had usually undertaken a degree of 'research' on which my artwork was based. But this was the first time that the research nearly overrode the actual making process. Each day I had to fight to complete the research before I felt I was ready to begin the work. As the work progressed I felt a conversation had begun between each piece, and from the studio windows I could integrate each story with the landscape as it merged by default through the clear acetate. When I had completed the work I had it photographed and the exhibitions officer offered to write an article for *Textile Fibre Forum* (Morimer, 1999). I felt that this was the first time that I had conducted what I would term 'research' now - although I'm sure I didn't perceive of it at the time. Utilising research in my artwork seemed somehow displaced. I had a nagging feeling after this residency that my art making had changed in some way.

During 1999 I did not really feel that I was encouraged to further my research aspirations as a full time student and part-time sessional staff member of the University. Gladly, this did change from 2000 onwards after research funding became a bigger issue and the faculty within which I worked needed publications in order to boost productivity. However I know that it was during this time that my interest in research had become more intense. I decided to submit a paper based on my MA research to the InSea (International Society of Education Through Art) World Congress held in Brisbane during 1999. I asked for some advice from various faculty members in the visual arts, who did not really think that it was very important. They were more interested in encouraging practical endeavours in the form of exhibitions and grant applications. To my delight, my very first conference paper was accepted. Strange as it may seem, in the same week of my conference presentation (Wednesday) I also had to contend with a major solo exhibition opening (Thursday) and extensive preparations to be bridesmaid for my sister-in-law (Saturday). I cannot remember which one of these events caused me the most stress. What stands out in my memory as I delivered my first conference paper was the sheer terror of standing in front of people with a spotlight on me, and willing them to first of all understand what I was saying, and second of all to think it was as important as I did.

Another seminal moment in my research journey occurred during 2000 when I was selected as the Australian representative for the Australia Council's International Residency to Banff, Canada. This award allowed me to travel to Banff with thirty international artists to engage in a thematic residency, titled 'Big City'. At this time I was working full time as an art co-ordinator at a secondary college. This brings me to my other challenge, the professional juggling of the roles of teacher and artist. After arriving home one evening I found an innocuous letter in the mailbox. When I turned it over I saw the Australia Council motto, and assumed it was a receipt of acknowledgment of the application, or a rejection letter. To my absolute delight I read that my application had been accepted and I would be going to Banff. With overflowing idealism and love for humanity, I made an appointment the next day to see the Principal to tell him my good news. Immediately the smoothly-oiled wheels of administration ground to a screeching halt as he told me that this 'jaunt' would disrupt the school program and surely the dates could be changed to suit school holiday

times. In desperation I wrote to the Australia Council to obtain a letter outlining the importance of this opportunity which I duly presented to the Principal. I was eventually 'allowed' to go, and it has certainly been a highlight of my artistic career, but by going I had made a decision in the eyes of the administration that my art had come first. If I had been denied, or worse denied myself, this opportunity I would have always regretted it. It was the most wonderfully creative time, and I felt that I had been set free from the strict parameters of this particular school environment, which felt even more rigid after this encounter.

I conducted a fair amount of research before I left Australia, as I realised the making would become paramount given the length of time I had to complete such an ambitious project. During the five weeks I was at the Banff School of Art I created a sculpture of a four bedroom house from wooden planks and wound the outside of the walls with nylon filament. The warp of the nylon filament was then woven with acetate images of art created by women artists, which I had cut into narrow strips to be used as the weft. The images were appropriate to the particular rooms – bedroom, bathroom, dining room and kitchen – in my sculptural house installation. I had thought about how the private space was being blurred with technology through television, email the phone. To emphasise this blurring I went into Banff and recorded the sounds of the city which could be likened to particular rooms. I recorded the sounds of a restaurant for the kitchen, a gymnasium for the bathroom, a concert performance for the dining room and a hotel reception desk for the bedroom. Sounds, lights and images – which were also taken in Banff and some brought over from Australia – were activated as you walked through the installation. Because of the acetate it was possible to see the viewer inside the work, thus blurring the division between public and private. To the astonishment of the organisers I created this in four and a half weeks – working quite often right through the night. However, what pervades my memory of this time is the pleasurable feeling of joyous exhaustion and a wealth of creative conversations. I also felt this was an important experience to be shared and it was published in an article titled '*Big City Banff International Residency*' (Baguley, 2001). It was strange to see my writing and images in a published format, as I had always seen that as the expertise of other people. However, it did increase my confidence somewhat in thinking that perhaps it was possible to write about something you were passionate about, instead of topics which were already prescribed.

But I digress. Overwhelmed by the public reception of my artistry, and feeling justifiably proud of myself, I brought the slides and video back to show the Principal. He held them up to the light, squinted quizzically, and said "What is it?" As I began to explain, I saw his eyes glaze over and I came to the dawning realisation that in the eyes of that particular school leader – and I doubt he is alone – a 'good art teacher' teaches during school hours and does not indulge in activities which interrupt the smooth running of schools. They also do not expect to take leave for five weeks and then bring back images which are incomprehensible to their principal. This was the same administration, however, that expected the art program to be displaced so that major backdrops could be painted for the school musical. Funnily enough, too, this ideology did not deter the school from using the accolades that I received in conversations with parents who were asking about the type of art program the school fostered.

These events led me to realise that I needed and deserved more. During the day, I worked full time at the secondary college which was an hour away from where I lived, and then would drive the hour back home, pass it, and continue for another twenty minutes to the University campus so that I could teach evening art classes at the university. At times it was only the stimulating environment of the university and the tertiary students that enabled me to focus on both of my teaching responsibilities. In the secondary context, and particularly with the senior students at the College, I felt that I was really contributing to their knowledge of art and its enormous power to express emotion. However the attitude of the administration to achievements by other staff members, particularly in the sporting arena, made me feel angry that the arts were not valued as highly.

I was disillusioned with the education system and knew that I wanted to work and to be within the University context. I knew that university lecturers were actually given one day off to conduct *research* or to *make art work*. The fact that you could strive to be the best that you could be was obviously appreciated and rewarded at the University level. I actively sought to change my situation. The school context I was immersed in was not conducive to the type of work I wanted to do, and so, the following year, I made the move I needed to make. I left the school, enrolled in my PhD, worked as a primary art specialist and undertook an artist-in-residence at a local state school. Researcher/Teacher/Artist – for once everything seemed to be in balance.

During that year, I was having a conversation with one of my Masters supervisors about opportunities at the University level and she suggested that I consider combining my two strengths: art and education. It sounds ridiculous now, but I had always treated them separately, as if there were no overlap. I believe this may have been because I had initially trained as an artist, and then had completing my teaching qualification. I gave serious consideration to what she had suggested and then, serendipitously, a few weeks later saw an advertisement for an art education lecturer. A few days after the interview, I received a phone call to offer me the position. I couldn't believe my good fortune! The chance to work within the university context as an arts educator to budding educators was like a dream come true to me. I teach my secondary art pre-service teachers that it is possible to still be an artist and a good teacher. I encourage them to value their skills and expertise and to provide a role model for their students by allowing them to see their work.

However, my university dream has come with its own pressures, particularly those concerning research and research outputs. While I was fascinated to discover that creative work, particularly in visual arts, could obtain research points, this work had to be grounded in research. As Jones (2006) notes, most art schools and art and design faculties in the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand, have or are developing PhD programs, however the credibility of art and design practice as research still seems to be open to dismissal (p. 226). Until recently the arts in higher education had not assessed their creative output as research. Artists are unused to thinking about their work as research. However, Presa notes 'opportunities for research founded on our everyday practices are often so familiar to us that they go unnoticed' (Presa, 2004, p. 179). The highly developed aesthetic, representational and lateral thinking skills demonstrated by artists are ideal attributes for research. However, they are often overlooked in a research paradigm based on scientific methodologies and outputs.

Thankfully there is now an expectation and recognition by university research offices that the performance and exhibition of the arts can be counted towards research quotas. This approach has enabled performance, exhibitions and other expressive forms to be counted as research. However, it has also created a disjuncture in other faculties. They query how the same qualification can be awarded for a 20 000 word exegesis and exhibition component in the arts faculty with an 80 000 – 100 000 word thesis required in another faculty. And here I stand once again straddling the borderline, because I am completing a PhD in visual arts but am working in education. My PhD does contain an exhibition component, but I curated the work of artists involved in collaboration, whilst also completing the full written complement expected in other faculties. However the superficial classification of Generation X still haunts me, even in my own faculty. People assume that because my PhD is in visual arts, it must be of lesser value or quality than the same research task that is expected of in education. There is great complexity inherent in attempting to measure different disciplines by the same yardstick. However, I feel that assumptions based on word count alone are unfair to artists who devote hundreds of hours to completing the exhibition component of their work, or curate an exhibition of national significance.

Academics generally, but particularly those in the arts areas are discovering the urgency of determining how their creative contribution can be counted as part of their research profile. As Ely (2003) notes: 'Employment, tenure and promotion in the university sector is assessed primarily on the excellence of research' (p. 9). Jones (2006) states that the problem regarding creative practice as research seems to centre on the confusion about the place of knowledge in practice when seen as being distinct from theory.

That art and design as well as the performing arts are practical is self-evident, but that does not mean that they are not also and simultaneously theoretically based in ways that go beyond know how (p. 227).

Purser and Montuori (1999) suggest that 'creative individuals are more capable of dealing with unforeseen situations because they tend to be more flexible and open to complexity' (p. 350). They suggest this ability is necessary in unstable times. Universities are going through difficult times at the moment, particularly in terms of measuring research outputs and the link between output and funding. Issues of research quantity versus research quality are currently being debated. It is therefore imperative that creativity, and creative individuals, be recognised as an important asset within the research paradigm of the University.

The opportunities to engage in research at UTAS are the types of opportunities I had been seeking. However, it seems that in order to take up such opportunities it is first necessary to be aware of where to seek them. In my first year (2004), most people in the Faculty were speaking about the AARE conference. This was obviously a regular event in their calendar, but one which was unfamiliar to me. I was most disappointed to realise that abstracts had already been submitted, and was surprised that nobody had told me about it. It seems that transfer of this type of knowledge is generally by osmosis or by being part of a mentoring group. I had thought that this type of group would have been long-established within my faculty at the University. However, it is only since last year (2005) that arts-interested people have formed a group with the



aim of mentoring one another and seeking out opportunities for conducting and disseminating research.

When I first started at the University, I began a Graduate Certificate in University Teaching and Learning because I felt desperate in my need to find out how everything functioned. This course proved to be very helpful to me in terms of my understanding of how SETLs<sup>3</sup> and Performance Management worked. Later units introduced me to initiatives in terms of research. Unfortunately, however, because I had transferred my PhD, I was not allowed to continue with the course until my PhD was finished. Rather ironically, the final unit which I need to complete the course promotes teaching as an area worthy of research investigation, and provides an opportunity to publish an article based on the assessment for this unit. I look forward to the time when I am able to take advantage of this opportunity.

To date, I have given a number of conference papers, had some articles published, completed a residency at the Victorian Tapestry Workshop, travelled to Adelaide, Brisbane and Melbourne to interview members of the embroidery guilds for my PhD, spent a week making studio visits for the exhibition I am curating, and have seen my work selected for a touring exhibition. My teaching efforts, too, have been recognised when I was awarded a Teaching Merit Certificate (2004) and Mentoring Award (2005). As a new staff member still completing my PhD, one bonus which I find I am entitled to is a research day each week. What pleases me greatly is that at no point did anybody say to me that what I was doing was a 'jaunt' or that my actions were disrupting the smooth running of the University. I cherish the fact that there is an inbuilt flexibility to enable this kind of 'creative research' to occur and that the definition of research does include creativity outcomes. As McGrath (2002) states:

Visual research practice is like that in any research field. It demands high levels of commitment and a determination to leave no stone unturned in the pursuit of new knowledge. Practising research is a consuming, intense and exciting activity requiring a well structured, clearly thought through plan actioned by a creative mind prepared to critique and be critiqued every step of the way.

These words provide an academic validation for the type of research undertaken in the creative arts fields. In hindsight I can see how the various themes that have been a feature of my life experiences and research interests - male/female, art/craft, public/private, reason/creativity have been constant companions on the research journey which I did not realise I had begun when I made the momentous decision to leave secondary high school teaching and learn to 'critique and be critiqued every step of the way.'

As I write this paper I am immersed in a 21-25 contact-hour teaching week throughout Semester 1, and in the last few days have completed my final presentation based on my PhD research. I am also writing another paper for this conference, have just repainted the gallery walls and hung an exchange exhibition of artworks created by education students from another Australian university. Additionally, I am providing an opportunity for our pre-service secondary art teachers to create education kits for the exhibition ...

... not too bad for a cynical, hopeless, frustrated and unmotivated slacker from Generation X ... who identifies as an Early Career Researcher.

### **Endnotes**

1. The *Partnership or Perish?* exhibition will be held from the 13<sup>th</sup> of July – 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2006. The featured artists are: Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford (site-specific installation artists), John Vella (sculpture/installation artist), the Victorian Tapestry Workshop (in conjunction with the artist Geoff Ricardo) and Denise Sprynski and Peter Boyd (fashion designers).
2. The official verbatim report of the proceedings of the Parliament.
3. The acronym SETL stands for Student Evaluation of Teaching and Learning, anonymous surveys completed by students at the end of a course, in which they evaluate the lecturer's unit and teaching style.

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