

# The Sources of Research-Creation: Historical and Multiple Perspectives

Isabelle Pichet and Cynthia Hammond

The combination of theoretical knowledge and practical skills, conceptual thinking and empirical experience, is an artistic approach that surfaces periodically throughout history. Artists have long brought reflective research into their creative practice to communicate the meaning of their work, from the Italian Renaissance humanist to the Grand Siècle academician and the productions of diverse Indigenous cultures in Africa, the Americas, Asia, and Australia. Always at the forefront of artistic practice, this approach is expressed in its current form by the relatively new term “research-creation.” Though research-creation is seen today as a Western and emerging approach, its foundations have enduring features that situate it within a discontinuous, multifaceted historical lineage composed of interruptions and re-emergence. All throughout history, clues, fragments, and witnesses to this approach have emerged here and there, scattered over time by cultures, artists, literary sources, and artworks.

In this same vein, from early modernity onwards, those who have supported liberalizing the arts have valued artists and their profession on the basis of an association of artistic practice and intellectual, introspective efforts. This extends to, for example, the founding of the *Académie royale de peinture et de sculpture* in Paris in 1648, which offered a theoretical-technical program with the aim of shaping a new kind of lettered artist set favourably apart from the master painters affiliated with artist guilds. Beyond offering social legitimacy, the importance given to scholarly teaching served an artistic vision where the notion of invention was coupled with that of

creation.<sup>1</sup> While invention as the formulation of the creative idea (*invenzione*) lay at the heart of this academic approach, developing innovative scientific knowledge related to materials and techniques did not go overlooked. The erudite artist’s research could easily extend to fields as distant as literature or chemistry. By the seventeenth century, the Académie had already embraced a relationship between theory and practice similar to that which has characterized university art teaching since the 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

And what about the arts developed within Indigenous cultures? If we look to Australian Indigenous cultures, whose artistic production draws on, among other things, a knowledge-gathering practice involving the apprehension of natural and artificial signs: the movements of animals and people, weather conditions, pictograms, etc.<sup>3</sup> Doesn’t this integration of signs and symbolism into artistic production reflect certain practices tied to research-creation? The transformation, adaptation, and transmission of this millennia-old knowledge certainly reveals, throughout history, some of the conditions of an approach that links research and creation.

The research project *Aux sources de la recherche création : perspectives historique et multiple/The Sources of Research-Creation: Historical and Multiple Perspectives* reflects on traces of research-creation scattered throughout time—somewhat fragmented moments that surface across cultures and history—and reveals clues as to the certain similarities or connections to the practice as we see it today. This look at research-creation focuses

mainly on understanding how the practice emerged over time, to better understand its evolution within artistic experimentation and production.<sup>4</sup> The varied definitions formulated by university organizations and researchers, granting bodies, artists, and others, and a careful reading of those definitions, reveals an interesting phenomenon beyond an absence of consensus: an absence of a historical view of the practice. Although recent literary research leaves the topic nearly untouched, indications of a practice where research and creation are woven together punctuate history.<sup>5</sup>

At the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a high level of interest in research-creation in the art world, and a multitude of attempts were made to define and establish theoretical foundations.<sup>6</sup> This emerging approach, which allows for a clearer definition of the work of artists whose practice combines creation and academic research, introduced an intellectual facet, a scientific approach, to the creative process through the renewal of knowledge and practices.<sup>7</sup> What is clear, however, is the lack of consensus on what research-creation really means in the academic, art, or institutional worlds. The varying definitions put forward by members of these communities clearly demonstrate a haziness around the concept and reveal an absence of agreement on what research-creation means.<sup>8</sup> In Canada, for instance, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) defines research-creation as “an approach to research that combines creative and academic research practices, and supports the development of knowledge and innovation through artistic expression, scholarly investigation, and experimentation.”<sup>9</sup> The Fonds de recherche du Québec – Société et culture (FRQSC), however, defines it as “any research process or approach that fosters creation and aims at producing new aesthetic, theoretical, methodological, epistemological, or technical knowledge. All of these processes and approaches must include, to varying degrees ... 1) Creative or artistic activities ... and 2) The problematization of these activities.”<sup>10</sup> There is a significant difference

between the two. At the SSHRC, research-creation implies academic research, whereas at the provincial level, a problematization of the research is sufficient. Here we see a marked difference, since the academic research in question does not simply involve problematizing research, but implies research intrinsically connected to creating and producing knowledge. The Canada Council for the Arts (CCA) and the Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec (CALQ) avoid the issue altogether by never using “research-creation” but instead “research and creation”<sup>11</sup> or “research, creation, exploration and production” to provide “assistance for research and experimentation activities that contribute to innovation in art or the development of new projects,”<sup>12</sup> further contributing to the practice’s epistemological imprecision. Inconsistencies are equally present in other Western artistic and academic spheres.<sup>13</sup> Variations aside, all of these reflections should be understood as the development of a field of research, where a theoretical and methodological framework tries to take shape in connection to a creative process that is never wholly stable nor static. Since the last third of the twentieth century, the modulations, transitions, or even transformations that are part of the practice have helped fuel artists’ and researchers’ enthusiasm for the approach. Part of its appeal is that it implies a continually renewed attempt to define the “creative act”<sup>14</sup>: this idea of potential expression germinating and propelling the artist towards new paths and the breaking down of barriers between practices.<sup>15</sup> Research-creation, in this sense, appears as an open and ever-changing space. The nuances and singularities that can be found in its definitions, in practice, and in how the “creative act” is understood highlight the need for a better understanding of research-creation’s foundations and its roots throughout history, while taking a broader and more multifaceted view of it.

Searching the past for traces of the approach emerging, we use historical and multiple perspectives to paint a portrait, or create a rough sketch, of the apparition and evolution of an approach that links creation with research, a bit like a

historiography of the practice. Four main directions were proposed to authors as starting points to reflect on the emergence of research-creation in some form.

- 1) The first direction is technical and formal innovation involving and combining, directly or indirectly, a theoretical reflection with a creative practice. On the one hand, this perspective focuses on the central role the artist plays in developing the techniques and technologies that shape artistic production. There is an attempt to delimit, discover, and reveal the different issues, stages, and methods that have led artists to push the boundaries of their disciplines and develop, innovate, renew, and create new materials, tools, or uses through their work. On the other hand, it seems inevitable that another point of interest is the way in which the invention or development of these new mediums, accessories, tools, technologies, or means of dissemination have in turn incited the artist to enrich their creative practice.
- 2) The second aspect looks at historical research and the poetic development of artistic practices that has led artists to reinvent their personal production while participating in a theoretical renewal of creative thought and working methods throughout history. This perspective allows us to define the way intellectual thinking and consideration of the historical, disciplinary, and conceptual context has led artists to place reflective thinking at the heart of their artistic practice.
- 3) The third avenue involves the development or transmission of artistic knowledge. Over time, different teaching and learning models have emerged, helping to refine the ways in which we hand down knowledge, both theoretically and technically. These knowledge-transfer methods have become entrenched in ways of thinking and, today, they offer insight into the importance and presence of traces of the

research-creation practice in different societies and cultures throughout history.

- 4) The final perspective we proposed was to open up thinking on research-creation outside of the Western framework to “bring together works on ancient and modern periods, to perceive occidental cultures as well as other those of other continents, the invariances as well as the singularities and innovations. The theme of research-creation also allows us to reimagine a heritage-based approach seen as the contemporary creation of another era”<sup>16</sup> or of another culture. We felt it important to take an expansive view of research-creation in relation to the idea of a “creative act” as a notion of openness and renewal. The aim here is to shed light on current discourse around research-creation by way of new avenues and possibilities, while considering all its ramifications, antecedents, and manifestations.

The authors of the texts gathered in this themed issue have considered these issues and have defined, studied, and analyzed some of the clues that artists have left behind in their practice and their writing, but also in their works. Without seeking to define or redefine what research-creation is, the authors have nevertheless had to reflect on the question and present the broad strokes of what they understand it to be, each in their own way. The topics chosen and their context, depending on the needs of the author, include a set of fairly precise and complex elements related to the subject’s established theoretical and methodological basis. This allows readers to more easily grasp the subtleties of each of the topics and the singularity of the traces of research-creation brought forward and described by the authors. We should note that the term “research-creation” is not necessarily used by all researchers, given that its usage or function could not be applied without it becoming anachronistic for the subjects covered by the texts. It should also be noted that the authors are in no way attempting to claim that the artists or projects mentioned

embody a definitive “research-creation,” but rather are revealing certain elements of this artistic approach that have punctuated history, eras, and cultures: a bit like the precursors or pioneers of what would later become research-creation at the end of the twentieth century.

The authors examine topics across the spectrum, all rooted in a specific time and culture. With her text on Salish blanket weavers, Alison Ariss outlines how Salish weaving practices, both customary and recent, are reminiscent of the main lines of thinking around research-creation in terms of their processes of creation, research, and transmission. The model for knowledge-sharing, innovation, and social or generational continuity that is part of Salish weavers’ practices shows that the practice of research-creation may be more universal than one might think, as this understanding of the weavers’ work allowed for a more global comprehension of it.

Looking back to the eighteenth century, Chantal Lapeyre brings us a study of ballet master Jean-Georges Noverre’s creative approach. She focuses on *Lettres sur la danse*, published in 1760, then expanded on in 1803–1804, and again in 1807<sup>17</sup>, in which Noverre develops a new vision of dance. In *Lettres*, Noverre develops his ideas through four different steps: introspective, theoretical, creative, and transmissive, as related to dance, choreography, and teaching. Lapeyre brings to light the aspects of Noverre’s work—the reflections and traces he left behind—that echo certain aspects of the research-creation practice that have germinated over time and contributed to the concept as we know it today.

Tara Allen-Flanagan brings us another moment where we can recognize the traces of a practice akin to research-creation with inventor and photographer Leo Daft’s stereographic images of electric currents. These photographs, published in the magazine *The Photographic Times* in 1875 and accompanied by an article where Daft shares his methodology, encouraging others to reproduce it, attest to a practice situated at the frontier of artistic creation, scientific research, and knowledge dissemination.

Through a combined approach of research-creation and post-colonial theory, Marco Deyasi’s work offers a reflection on the significance and impact of the colonial vision imparted at world’s fairs, within the “colonial sciences,” and in Symbolist artworks around the 1890s. Deyasi seeks to elucidate and identify certain elements in the work of artist Paul Ranson that demonstrate the prevalence of institutionalized racism and colonialism at the end of the nineteenth century as a source of creation and knowledge subversion. Using research-creation as a device, Deyasi questions the way in which artists and occultists were engaged with colonial discourse and—simultaneously—attempted to transgress and transcend it.

A period of transformation and artistic development, the late nineteenth century reveals, according to Virginie LaSalle, a defining moment for the development of women’s thinking around interior design in the home and domestic engineering. LaSalle highlights the way that experiences of place and the design of domestic spaces converged to create an innovative kind of architecture backed by rigorous methodology. This process of creation, which implies a sensed and felt integration of knowledge intermingling human, spatial, and temporal characteristics, at times reveals features of a practice close to research-creation. The author pushes her thinking even further, evoking ideas of mutual aid, sharing, and transmission of an interwoven approach that draws on both the intellect and the senses.

Treva Michelle Legassie also delves into the sensory, examining the relationship between artistic production and the mindfulness represented in John Cage’s sound work and in his interest in mycological forays, situated between creative ritual and silent composition. Here, research-creation as a practice that is continually (re)inventing itself through improvisation and diverse modes of expression is rooted in the inspiration that Cage finds in his passion for mushrooms and foraging. The practice is also echoed, today, in Amish Morell and Diane Borsato’s curated mycological forays and performance-creation. Sharing, transmitting, and developing knowledge using a

scientific, empirical practice brings to mind certain characteristics of research-creation development as we see it today, while also disrupting more traditional scholarly methods.

Édith-Anne Pageot brings us a decentred vision of research-creation and the tangible link to practice in the meeting of individuals and their disciplines, while moving away from a purely positivist vision. Pageot uses the collective projet *La zona del silencio* as an entry point. The project, carried out between 1984 and 1985 in the Mexican desert, involved community-building through a relationship to the environment, to the land, and to one another. In the later stages of what would become research-creation, the project brought together artists of different origins—Mexico, Germany, Canada, and the Cree Nation—and distinct disciplinary backgrounds, symbolizing a “disruptive and transformative potential.” Pageot retraces certain aspects of research-creation often absent from present-day definitions.

In their text, art historian Saskia Hanselaar and artist-researchers Louise Hervé & Clovis Maillet explain the production steps for a performative piece that combines historical research and present-day creation. Digging into the past, the three authors unearth the creative research of a group of artists who studied with Jacques-Louis David’s studio during the height of the French Revolution, where their practice included inspiration for meditation and old costumes. Hanselaar, Hervé, and Maillet use this knowledge to (re)construct a work inspired by actions and artistic experiences taken from the past. Every step of the way, they propose and reflect on a renewal of art and life using certain key elements taken from historical re-enactments.

We also felt it was important to hear from artists about current research-creation and the importance of and resonance between institutions and funding bodies. Branka Kopecki interviews Marcel Jean, an associate professor at Université Laval’s École d’art, as well as professional artists Martin Bruneau and Eveline Boulva.

Despite our desire to create space for reflection outside of Western thinking around

research-creation, we came to note that very few researchers explored this subject. Clearly, there is significant work to be done. The many historical traces are clear, and yet it seems that, when it comes to thinking about research-creation with a more global perspective, there are still fetters from which it is difficult to break free. We sincerely hope that the path will widen and that artists and researchers alike can follow it, so that research-creation can become enriched by its multiple origins. The authors here have given us a diverse range of current definitions, which has also allowed them to sketch a new and historical vision of research-creation by laying foundations that date back much further than one might think. The uniqueness of the assembled writings lies in something similar: a desire to research, reveal, and identify the traces left behind by artists, cultures, and writings over time, which gave the authors a fresh perspective on artistic production of the past, revealing the genesis of what we know today as research-creation and positioning it using historical and multiple perspectives.

At the intersection of the sociology of art,<sup>18</sup> material history, and the anthropology of scholarly practices,<sup>19</sup> this collection of texts offers historical and nuanced perspectives into the roots of research-creation practice. The goal was to uncover traces of the emergence and constitution of this link between research and creation throughout history.

The authors have also revealed some of the processes or paths taken by past creators. The texts reconstruct the ways of thinking, the socio-cultural, scientific, and cultural markers, and the kinds of production and transmission that led research-creation to become part of different societies and different teaching models—traditional or ancestral, related to an academy, a fine arts school, or university—allowing us to measure the impact of the artist’s social recognition. Their publication of these texts offers an overview of the sources of development for the practice which has become research-creation. ¶

Isabelle Pichet is associate professor/lecturer at the Université du Québec à Trois-Rivières.  
— isabelle.pichet@uqtr.ca

Cynthia Hammond is a professor of Art History at Concordia University.  
— cynthia.hammond@concordia.ca

1. Louis-Claude Paquin and Cynthia Noury, “Petit récit de l’émergence de la recherche-création médiatique à l’UQAM et quelques propositions pour en guider la pratique,” *Communiquer*, special issue, “La communication à l’UQAM – 50 ans d’audace,” (2020): 103–136, <http://journals.openedition.org/communiquer/5042>.

2. Paquin and Noury, “Petit récit de l’émergence de la recherche-création médiatique à l’UQAM,” 108.

3. Sylvie Crossman and Jean-Pierre Barou, eds., *La résistance des signes: peintres aborigènes d’Australie* (Bouzigues, Indigènes éditions, 2012).

4. Joseph D. Sweet, Emppu Nurminen, and Mirka Koro-Ljungberg, “Becoming Research With Shadow Work: Combining Artful Inquiry With Research-Creation,” *Qualitative Inquiry* 26, n. 3–4 (2020): 388–399; Sophie Stévançe, “À la recherche de la recherche-création: la création d’une interdiscipline universitaire,” *Canadian University Music Society/Société de musique des universités canadiennes* 33, n. 1 (2012): 3–9.

5. Roger Guillemin, “Similitudes et contrastes des processus de la créativité dans les sciences et dans les arts,” in *La création artistique à l’université*, ed. Joël de la Nouë (Montréal: Éditions Nota bene, 2000), 21–29.

6. Sweet, Nurminen, and Koro-Ljungberg, “Becoming Research With Shadow Work: Combining Artful Inquiry With Research-Creation”; Stévançe, “À la recherche de la recherche-création: la création d’une interdiscipline universitaire.”

7. Guillemin, “Similitudes et contrastes des processus de la créativité dans les sciences et dans les arts.”

8. Paquin and Noury, “Petit récit de l’émergence de la recherche-création médiatique à l’UQAM”; Stévançe, “À la recherche de la recherche-création: la création d’une interdiscipline universitaire”; Pierre Gosselin and Éric Le Coguiec, eds., *La recherche création: pour une compréhension de la recherche en pratique artistique* (Québec: Presses de l’Université du Québec, 2006). See also Owen Chapman and

Kim Sawchuk, “Creation-as-Research: Critical Making in Complex Environments,” *RACAR* 40, n. 1 (2015), 49–52; and Natalie Lovelless, ed., *Knowings and Knots Methodologies and Ecologies in Research-Creation* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2019), xix.

9. *Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council*, “Definitions of Terms,” June 11, 2023, <https://sshrc-crsh.gc.ca/funding-financement/programmes-programmes/definitions-eng.aspx#a22>.

10. *Fonds de recherche du Québec*, June 11, 2023, <https://frq.gouv.qc.ca/en/program/research-creation-support-program-rc-2022-2023/>.

11. *Canada Council for the Arts*, June 11, 2023, <https://canadacouncil.ca/funding/grants/explore-and-create/research-and-creation>.

12. *Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec*, June 11, 2023, <https://calq.gouv.qc.ca/aides/recherche-exploration>.

13. For example, the French Ministère de la Culture also uses “research and creation,” <https://culture.gouv.fr/en/Thematic/Higher-Education-and-Research/Cultural-research/Research-and-Creation>; while Université de Paris-Saclay offers a diploma program where students can develop “theoretical and practical reflection on contemporary artistic creation and on scientific and technological research,” <https://ens-paris-saclay.fr/en/agenda/call-applications-research-creation-diploma-rcda>. The WalkingLab, a collaborative project between University of Melbourne and McMaster University, proposes another variation of what research-creation should look like: “the complex intersection of art practice, theoretical concepts, and research,” <https://walkinglab.org/research-creation/>. How the project views research-creation lends added complexity by separating the work process into three aspects.

14. See the lecture given by Gilles Deleuze on May 17, 1987, <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/lecture/lecture-01-21/>; <https://contemporaneitesdelart.fr/gilles-deleuze-quest-ce-que-lacte-de-creation/>.

15. Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari, *L’anti-Œdipe* (Paris: Les éditions de minuit, 1972).

16. Samuelle Ducrocq-Henry, “Entretien avec Catherine Courtet autour de la recherche-création en France,” *Magazine de l’Acfas*, February 13, 2018, <https://www.acfas.ca/publications/magazine/2018/02/entretien-catherine-courtet>. Translation: Aleshia Jensen.

17. Jean-Georges Noverre, *Lettres sur la Danse, sur les Ballets et les Arts (1803)* (1760, repr.; Lucca: Libreria Musicale Italiana, 2012), [https://www.lim.it/en/essay/2366-lettres-sur-la-danse-sur-les-ballets-et-les-arts-1803-9788870966480.html#/2-tipo\\_prodotto-book](https://www.lim.it/en/essay/2366-lettres-sur-la-danse-sur-les-ballets-et-les-arts-1803-9788870966480.html#/2-tipo_prodotto-book).

18. Florence de Mèredieu, *Histoire matérielle et immatérielle de l’art moderne et contemporain*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Paris: Larousse, 2017).

19. Christian Jacob, *Lieux de savoir: espaces et communautés*, vol. 1 (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007); and Jacob, *Lieux de savoir: les mains de l’intellect*, vol. 2 (Paris: Albin Michel, 2011).