

Special Investigations

*Randy Lee Cutler in conversation
with John Cussans*

This interview between Randy Lee Cutler and John Cussans explores the relationship of research to artistic practice and highlights some of the shared concerns that have arisen in their respective work and geographical contexts.

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RANDY LEE CUTLER: I would like to begin by discussing how you engage with research in your artistic practice, how you understand or describe your artistic practice, which I know is quite nuanced with regard to research and the ways in which it does, or doesn't, align with current funding models in the UK. Let's start by talking about your current work on a Leverhulme-funded artistic research project—The Skullcracker Suite—designed to test Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's notion of "the permanent decolonization of thought" in the context of the contemporary art scene of British Columbia since the 1970s. How does this project take up artistic research?

JOHN CUSSANS: The Skullcracker Suite is a multilayered project that currently involves three interwoven fields of research: the story of science fiction writer Philip K. Dick's stay at the X-Kalay Foundation in Vancouver in 1972 (a primarily First Nations rehab centre using

radical encounter group therapy); the broad idea of decolonization as enacted in Vancouver since the 1970s (specifically in artistic practices and education); and the survival and resurgence of Indigenous ceremonial and healing practices in the region (primarily the potlatch and Hamatsa traditions of the Kwakwaka'wakw peoples). As a general research project, it involves a range of traditional methods: scholarly and archival research, interviews, seminars, and discussion groups. The artistic research strategies are rather more unconventional and obtuse relative to those used in other humanities disciplines. These include restaging scenes from Philip K. Dick's time in Vancouver, the conversion of a gallery space into a "Special Investigations Room," documentation of research events, interviews and discussions, film screenings, and the generation of a number of 360-degree video recordings. The material generated from these recordings is then recomposed into a feasible format for future exhibition.

CUTLER: It is an intriguing project. Given that we did our postgraduate degrees together at the Royal College of Art (RCA) in the UK, I have enjoyed witnessing the evolution of your practice and how you work with new cultural forms. It has been inspiring to have a colleague whose art practice is as hybrid as my own. I often think of my creative interests and formats in terms of emergence especially in relation to the more traditional fine arts. Have you felt challenged or constrained by the existing categories for artistic research and production within both academic and gallery contexts?

CUSSANS: I think our similar approaches may have to do with a shared background in art history. Ever since I read Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art" essay as an undergrad, I've been deeply suspicious of claims that a work can be read and understood in isolation from the networks which frame and give meaning to it. What is written and claimed about a work of art, and where and how it is made public,

has always interested me at least as much as the work itself. Also, I studied illustration rather than fine art at undergraduate level, which tends to have a more research-led approach to the creation of artworks. So, for me, the final artwork is less important than the processes involved in bringing it to exhibition and making it public. Although such approaches are considered anathema by some in the fine art world, in the current academic research climate this is more acceptable (at least in some institutions) than it used to be. As funding bodies in the UK increasingly expect the knowledge generated in the production of an artwork to be more evident to non-specialist assessors of its worth, so works which foreground the research process seem to be getting more support. But it doesn't suit the commercial or traditional gallery systems, which still locate the ultimate meaning and value of an artwork in the thing-in-itself.

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CUTLER: I really appreciate your investment in the research process and the networks that frame and give meaning to an artwork; this kind of thinking informed my interest in the Cultural History program at the Royal College of Art where we both focused our energies and research on cultural contexts. This relates to the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to research-creation. I'd like to talk more about that. But, first, can we go back to "process" and the skills required in articulating art making in relation to it. What are the challenges of presenting one's research as processual, and how does emergence and not knowing inform your practice?

CUSSANS: Retrospectively, it seems very important that Christopher Frayling set up the Cultural History program at the RCA. Chris is an important figure in the development of debates about research in the arts, having written a paper in 1993 that continues to inform scholarly debates on the topic. In the paper, he identified three conventional types of artistic research: research about art (art history, sociology of art, etc.), research for art (the research artists

do in the process of developing and creating works), and research through art. The first two types of research were reasonably straightforward and familiar to most artists and educators at the time. The latter has proven to be more contentious and difficult to define. (The developing field of research-creation in Canada seems to be situated within the overlapping epistemic and methodological discourses generated by the research-as-art/art-as-research debates in Europe). In terms of my own research practice, the first two forms of research take precedence over the latter. In some ways, the project is as much the artwork itself as any discreet exhibitable artifact generated in the process. So, presenting the work as processual is in keeping with the way I like to do things. I find blogs particularly useful in this regard. They can be used as sites where a project's theoretical underpinnings, research-in-progress, and aesthetic unfolding can be indexed and made public without having to consider the blog an art object in itself.

With regard to “emergence” and “not knowing,” these are very difficult processes to discuss precisely—although I’m aware of the theoretical traditions which have informed their current usage in contemporary artistic debate. I wonder if the term *creativity*, a more recognized and conventional term, doesn't contain both meanings. (I acknowledge that this term has been overused and subject to much critical deconstruction over the last few decades, but I would like to reaffirm the positive sense of it expressed by Raymond Williams in *The Long Revolution*). But staying with your terms, there's a difference between emergences that happen in the process of “research for art” and those which happen “through art.” For example, the concept of the Skullcracker Suite came through long informal discussions between friends “about” art (and many other things) and coalesced at a particular shared communal moment into an idea “for art.” Then, as the project developed, emails were exchanged, books read, and work started to be made, new ideas emerged directly from the process of reading, thinking, and communicating. And then there

were the aesthetic and technical “inventions” that happened in the process of doing a shoot, editing a video or installing an exhibition. To sum up, I would say that there are different kinds of emergences that happen in the multifaceted process of bringing art into the world: realization moments; apprehensions of previously unrecognized patterns and connections between disparate clusters of information and knowledge; the gaining of technical skills and proficiencies; satisfying solutions to aesthetic obstacles or problems; humbling spiritual insights; profound experiences of ontological transformation; new social and cultural sensitizations and sensibilities; new metaphysical and political insights, etc. All of these could be read as not-knowns. But the idea of anamnesis is also very important to me: the sense that we knew something all along, but we didn't know how to access that knowledge. In this sense, I strongly associate the “work” of art as something akin to esoteric practice.

CUTLER: This is exactly why I am so engaged in your practice. I appreciate that you don't shy away from the marginal, the pop cultural, or the boundaries of what is considered legitimate knowledge. This is related to my current research into mineral specimens and how they are entangled across a larger field of material speculation, including the esoteric, the scientific, and the technological. I am wondering whether you see your own research and research methods as embodied and/or responding to ecological, material, and more-than-human ways of thinking about questions of epistemology.

CUSSANS: I think both of us learned a great deal from our engagement with surrealism in our earlier studies. Of all the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, surrealism was perhaps the most promiscuous in terms of transdisciplinary ambition and scope. It also tended to disregard established hierarchies of cultural taste, propriety, and value. A figure like Roger Caillois seems important here, having written across the disciplines of anthropology,

zoology, psychoanalysis, religious studies, and, importantly, mineralogy. The work of Elizabeth Grosz, Donna Haraway, Marina Warner, and Avital Ronell seem to me to be part of this tradition, too. Your work with salt and crystals, for instance, has clear correlations with your doctoral research into surrealism, science, and magic. It is also informed by ideas of embodiment and entanglement articulated by second- and third-wave feminist writers. In terms of my own research methods, I have defined one stream of it as “paranoid-critical theory” (i.e., a mode of inquiry combining Salvador Dali’s paranoid-critical method, Frankfurt School critical theory, and more esoteric, occult, and “hyperstitional” thought). More generally, I’d describe my research as a kind of (speculative) psycho-materialism. Despite being broadly materialist and systems-orientated, however, my research was not overtly concerned with ecological issues until recently. That’s largely due to spending time with yourself and other colleagues in British Columbia, where ecological consciousness and practice are very highly evolved. One of the core lines of inquiry guiding the Skullcracker Suite, for instance, is what alliances have been created between contemporary eco-centric thought and practice and Indigenous struggles for historical recognition, political justice, and territorial sovereignty in the region. This is why Viveiros de Castro’s concept of “cannibal metaphysics,” drawing explicitly on Amerindian cosmologies, multinatural perspectivism, and interspecies kinship systems, is so important for that project. What can the “metaphysics of predation,” understood within the framework of Indigenous metaphysics and myth, tell us about the more-than-human dynamics of colonialism, capitalism, and insatiable consumerism?

CUTLER: As you know, I am fascinated with our kinship with rocks and in particular how the properties of minerals that are harnessed in science and technology are often the same qualities dismissed as new age or archaic in supernatural contexts. This has currently taken

the form of an artist's book project, what I am calling an elemental typology that explores the history and ubiquity of mineral specimens. Wherever possible I bring Indigenous knowledge and/or stories, including copper, uranium, labradorite, seer stones, and sacred stones, into the larger network of relations. Coming from the UK context and understanding some of the challenges of conducting research in Canada, particularly British Columbia, what do you see as the key issues of working with the realities of colonization and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's notion of "the permanent decolonization of thought"?

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CUSSANS: Our kinship with nonhuman entities is a core issue for the Skullcracker project. As you know, the sentience and soul of manufactured entities was a recurring theme in Philip K. Dick's work. In fact, the talk he gave in Vancouver in 1972, "The Android and the Human," which he considered his most accomplished statement on the subject at that time, spoke directly to this issue. Two years later he was contacted by an extraterrestrial entity he variously called Zebra and The Plasmate. The vision was triggered by the Greek symbol of ichthus: two intersecting arcs creating the shape of a fish. The fish symbol has a number of esoteric meanings within the Greek mystery religions and early Christianity, several of which have become important for the Skullcracker Suite: its reference to food animals, underground resistance movements, the Eucharist, religious conversion, and the hunting of souls. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's book *Cannibal Metaphysics* has been a guiding theoretical text for the project so far. It is there that he proposes that the task of contemporary ethnography is the permanent decolonization of thought. To summarize his notion of cannibal metaphysics drastically, it denotes a mode of thinking common to several Amerindian peoples encountered by European colonial writers between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, for whom the ontological distinction between humans and other kinds of entities

could not be drawn in the ways that Western, Christian thought had become accustomed to. Man may be a wolf to man (Hobbes) but, from the Amerindian perspective discussed by Viveiros de Castro, a wolf is a person to a wolf. Within the Indigenous cultures of the Pacific Northwest our ancestors were other species, in some cases, such as salmon, beings upon which their communities depended for food. In this context, salmon are a “people” who have a sea and river dwelling form, and with whom land-dwelling people have an ancient, intimate, and essential kinship, one predicated on the universal necessity of all beings to eat other beings. Georges Bataille, who dedicated an important chapter of his book on general economy to the Northwest Coast Indigenous potlatch economy, expressed this idea precisely in his book *Theory of Religion* where he wrote, “Immanence is given when one creature eats another. And it is always a fellow creature that is eaten.”

The Skullcracker Suite operates very much within this tradition of critical, counter-colonial ethnographic thought and practice. It takes its name from the giant cannibal crane of Kwakwaka'wakw legend, Hox'hok, who cracks the skulls of humans to eat their brains. Hox'hok, one of three bird consorts to Baxbakwalanuxsiwaé, the Cannibal at the North End of the World, plays a central role in the dances performed during potlatches and winter ceremonials amongst Kwakwaka'wakw peoples, notably within the dances of the Hamatsa, a secret society of alleged cannibals, whose initiation rites involve the staged transformation of an insatiable human flesh-eater into a being who can live with their kin without devouring them. That a bird can be understood as a cannibal precisely because it eats human flesh represents for us Viveiros de Castro's notion of cannibal metaphysics in a striking way. From this perspective, all interspecies predation (or all food chains) are in some way cannibalistic. The idea of cracking nuts or skulls therefore seemed an appropriate transcultural metaphor for the radical transformation of mind suggested by “cannibal metaphysics” and the permanent

decolonization of thought. Our project, then, depends very heavily on ideas derived from Indigenous mythology and cultural practices, taken partly from Western traditions of counter-colonial ethnography and theory, and also from the living traditions, arts, ceremonials, and political struggles of the First Nations people of British Columbia. Within this context, salmon have become the guiding beings enabling us to reflect upon the implications of this mode of thought for the contemporary politics of identity, personhood, territory, interspecies co-dependence, Indigenous rites, colonial and Indigenous modes of production and consumption, and ecological and social justice activism.

Which brings me to the second part of your question: the challenges of conducting research in British Columbia as a UK citizen, and of working with the realities of colonization and decolonization there. The two parts of this question are interwoven. I first came to Vancouver in 2000, on your invitation, to teach a number of social science modules at the Emily Carr Institute of Art and Design (ECIAD). The very fact that you and I had developed a working relationship that could make this happen indicates how interconnected the worlds of UK and Canadian academia are. Broadly speaking, we share a first language, an academic framework, and artistic, intellectual, and cultural knowledges that are determined primarily by European culture and its colonial expansions. (We also, importantly, share the same constitutional monarch.) At the same time, we have both adopted a critical stance towards the more oppressive, violent, unjust, and unconsciously biased characteristics of the paradigms within which we have been educated. From this critical perspective, we have taught ourselves to be vigilant about any unspoken naturalizations of historically constructed hierarchies, values, assumptions, knowledges etc. that might be implicit in how and what we teach. Retrospectively, I think it was a certain complacency on my part, derived from a hubristic assumption that my practice was aligned with an anti-colonial, pro-feminist, and ostensibly “revolutionary”

long-term project, that prevented me from seeing how complicit I was with an ongoing colonial project. This was brought home to me by First Nations students at the school with whom I began to discuss what decolonization could mean in an educational context. *Why would a British person be teaching about potlatch on an arts program in British Columbia?* Is not the very fact of my teaching at the ECIAD an indication that its pedagogical architecture is fundamentally Anglo-European? And aren't the very building blocks and evaluative criteria of my own thought, teaching practices, and academic judgements, founded on critical theories and pedagogical practices derived from a long tradition of overtly Western metaphysics and philosophy (even if they are explicitly critical of and antagonistic towards them)? These are the kind of questions I have been addressing as part of the Skullracker project.

What I have found most difficult is the critical reception of the project amongst my Euro-Canadian peers who are much more accustomed to the complexities and sensitivities of this debate amongst the settler, Métis, and Indigenous communities of the BC art world. I'm very conscious that these debates have been going on for decades, and that much intellectual, creative, and political energy has already been given to them. With this in mind, much of my own time and energy in the UK is spent familiarizing myself with that history and its associated debates. Despite the critical challenges to the project from the intellectual and artistic milieu of Vancouver, however, I have received some positive encouragement from members of the Fort Rupert and Alert Bay Kwakwaka'wakw communities, for whom my Britishness does not seem to be an obvious obstacle. This was expressed most directly through the invitation to attend Chief Alan Hunt's potlatch ceremony at the Tsaxis Big House in summer 2016. That invitation came through the great Kwakwaka'wakw artist Beau Dick, via my good friend and former ECIAD student Steve Calvert, who had been living in Alert Bay for several years. For Alan, Beau, and other members of their

communities, my Britishness is very important. There are a number of reasons for this, perhaps the most important being that Alan has an English ancestor whose name he still carries: Robert Hunt, a fur trader for the Hudson Bay Trading Company from Dorset, who married Mary Ebbets, a high-ranking member of the Raven Clan of the Taantakwáan tribe of the Tlingit nation. Their second child, George Hunt, would become the ethnographic consultant for Franz Boas, and is one of Alan's great-grandparents. For Alan then my Englishness is less of an obstacle to communication and collaboration than an acknowledged genealogical line of potential kinship and mutual respect.

So, to sum up my answer your question, the main obstacles to pursuing a project about decolonization in British Columbia are the critical and theoretical challenges to the assumed prerogatives of my gender, ethnic and national identity as somehow representative, in microcosm, of the dominant subjectivity of settler colonialism that has been challenged and resisted by various kinds of intersectional identity politics and alliances for decades there. These challenges occur primarily in the educated intellectual milieu of Euro-Canadian colleagues, who have spent many years learning from Indigenous artists, activists, and educators in the region, and as such are hyper-aware of the complexities involved in addressing these issues from a non-Indigenous perspective.

CUTLER: Thank you for that considered and detailed response.

To conclude, if only for this interview, the concept of research-creation and the ever-evolving area of interdisciplinary practices demand that our work and its modes of inquiry are always shifting in response to current issues and contemporary ways of thinking, writing, making, and sharing our discoveries. I believe that this is what constitutes a practice or praxis, where knowledge and experience are translated into action of some form or another. Working alongside colleagues who continue their own hybrid knowledge

making while taking account of our historical moment informs modes of research that are often complex, sometimes difficult, and always aligned with emergent ways of being, knowing, and not knowing. This, for me, is at the core of what is most exciting and generative about these ways of working across art and research practices in the academy.