

Dancing the Data. C. Bagley & M. Cancienne (Eds.) (2002). Elijah Mirochnik (Gen. Ed.). *Lesley University Series in Arts and Education* (vol. 5). New York: Peter Lang, 2002, 202 pages, softcover.

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Picture, if you can, the 1960s (and still working) comic George Carlin. One of his bits features "Icebox Man" whom we meet as he rummages through his family's refrigerator. Turning to us with a plate carefully covered in plastic wrap, he asks, "Honey? Is this good? It looks like meat ... and it looks like cake. I think ... it's ... meat-cake! Honey? Is this good?"

In reviewing *Dancing the Data*, a diverse anthology of 12 explorations of arts-based research, I feel a strong connection with Icebox Man's sense of hopeful puzzlement. The editors Carl Bagley and Mary Beth Cancienne have stocked this collection with examples of educational research that explore many traditional educational questions such as adolescents' experiences of the school environment, young children's creative play, researchers' own stories of childhood, schools and the academy, and, of course, questions of methodology. All of this important but not surprising stuff is offered here in challenging, new, arts-based forms that range from improvisational dance to collage (lots of collage), from poetry to original musical compositions. In some cases the arts element is embedded in a fairly recognizable qualitative research framework. In other cases the arts element is offered as the research *in toto*. In every case the researcher's fluency with an art form is only half the equation. My fluency in responding to the arts is also a factor. So the big and important question that I as the reviewer have to face is: "Is this meat? Is this cake? Is this meat-cake?" Or is it just compost? Like Icebox Man I think I recognize some good things and a few things I am suspicious about as well as a number of things I just don't feel qualified to judge.

Before getting to details about the text, I need to reveal my position. I am an art educator who has invested an important portion of my career in making visual art. I have studied under and worked as a colleague with nationally significant artists in Canada and the United States. I have also studied under and worked as colleagues with nationally significant Canadian and US art educators. I have published, presented, and taught image-based research. Thus like many of you I am a *transdisciplinary*. I occupy and move quite freely through several different spaces. Like a court eunuch I am well received in both the art and education worlds, because despite my interest, knowledge, and experience, I am perceived as having little power. I feel a well-earned confidence in responding to *Dancing the Data* as a visual work of arts-based educational research. But as a transdisciplinary I have also learned to be cautious about what I don't know. The privilege of access is tenuous at best. In responding to

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Dancing the Data I do not comment at length on those portions of the book that draw from dance or music because I am not equipped to bring the same degree of rigor¹ to those readings. The key to maintaining access as a transdisciplinary is a clear understanding of the dominant values of the worlds in which I move. Knowing what matters in several fields simultaneously is also central to valuing the examples of arts-based research in *Dancing the Data*. I explore both the puzzle and the promise of *Dancing the Data* by focusing on two specific contributions, as well as the text's general structure and by attending specifically to the notion of rigor and visuality.

Picking up *Dancing the Data* we first see the title in simple white text, and then visually in back of this, we notice that the whole surface is a sinuous, blurred, indigo-blue figure gently superimposed with a complementary tint of blue text that repeats the title over its surface. Diagonally, across the upper right corner, is a thin black band like a sash, with white text announcing "CD-Rom Included." On investigation I discover that the figure is a still from Terry Jenoure's music, spoken-word, and movement performance, which is featured on the CD. As a visual attempt to reconcile the sensual humanity of the performing body, the academic formality implicit in the typographic choices of the titling and the commercial imperative of the banner advertising the CD, the cover of *Dancing the Data* epitomizes the editors' challenges in assembling this body of work.

The text offers 12 examples of arts-based research divided into three categories: Dance and Theater Data; Music and Poetry Data; and Visual Arts Data. At the back of the book in a plastic pocket is a CD titled *Dancing the Data Too*. Diving right in to the thick of things (because that's how the book begins), the first chapter is a diaristic accounting of the editors' efforts to organize a research performance. Because of last-minute challenges that any sympathetic reader will understand, the "show goes on" but the authors agonize about some of the last-minute compromises that clearly did not meet their own sense of quality. This first chapter and the performance on the CD show that editors Bagley and Cancienne care deeply about the craft and meanings valued by their artistic and academic communities. With this in mind, I find it surprising that as editors they make no attempt to explain the organizing categories, the criteria for selecting the example research, or the relationship between the print text and the CD in *Dancing the Data*. It wasn't until I had read several chapters that it became clear that it would make more sense to view the CD work by each researcher before reading the print text. In some cases this was essential to understanding, as the written text was either a commentary or a process journal reflecting on the CD material. In several cases the text was at least in part simply a transcription of the CD (which was handy because the audio levels on many of the performances was quite low). I can only wonder if this absence of an editorial voice had some theoretical grounding. By focusing on issues of quality in their own work, the editors introduce a theme that I believe is central to arts-based research generally. In briefly comparing two specific studies below, I expand on the concept of rigor and suggest how colleagues can read arts-based research.

In Knowles and Thomas' "Artistry, Inquiry, and Sense-of-Place: Secondary School Students Portrayed in Context," the CD and text complement each

other. The CD opens with a screen that lists four students' names. Each name is framed by two buttons labeled to indicate the years 2000 and 2001. Clicking one of the year 2000 buttons under *johnny*, *david*, *sara*, or *katherine* leads to a brief slide show of photos and collages created by that student that is accompanied by their reading of a personal reflection. The words and images offer internal and external aspects of that student's perceptions of school. If you then click the 2001 button, new words and images evoke questions. How has this young person's life in this place changed over the past year? How are these words and images evidence? This becomes even more complex when you add information by moving from one student to another. By itself or with minimal explanation of the researchers intent, Knowles and Thomas' CD piece does many of the things we would expect of narrative research. Reading the accompanying text adds an important element that serves both the research and the general cause of clarifying arts-based methodologies.

The text mentions how researcher Knowles came across the Landworks installation of photo artist Marlene Creates. It was Creates' work that inspired the researchers. It was her work that was used to lead the students to a process through which they communicated their sense of place. Significantly, the students' work was publicly exhibited in conjunction with some of Creates' work. The fact that an example of Creates' work is not on the CD is an important omission. It may be that part of the failing of the "modernist project to rigor" (Madigan, 1986) was the assumption that answers are more important than questions. I would argue that the open-ended structure of the visual arts functions like a question. By linking student work to Creates', Knowles and Thomas have not only guided their subjects toward questions, but have given us a point of reference from within the rigor of photographic art as a discipline. Because of this juxtaposition we have some basis to ask if the questions the students' work represents are good questions. Knowles and Thomas' research doesn't tell us what students' experience of place is. Instead, by bringing together the work of a group of students and an artist and by showing a good understanding of both the paper and digital media, they have evoked vivid questions about schools, adolescents, and the representation of place and research process.

In "Women Myths: Teacher Self-Image and Socialization to Feminine Stereotypes," Susan Finlay presents a four-phased research program. In phase 1, using image fragments drawn from popular print media such as magazines, the author produced 12 collages meant to represent 12 stereotypical portrayals of women. It is not clear where these 12 types came from, although the author does mention asking early research subjects to comment on the evocativeness of categories such as woman as Gaea, Dominatrix, Good Girl, Princess, and so forth. In phase 2 she invited classroom teachers to look at these collages and the categories they represent and use them as a focus for writing stories about themselves or former teachers. In phase 3 the teachers were asked to step back from their stories and analyze them for their implications for the roles of women in education. Phase 4 is a brief CD slide show with a gentle acoustic guitar and violin improvisation as a musical accompaniment. Finlay describes this multimedia element as one interpretation of the research process above.

I find this example of research problematic on several levels. Throughout the print text it is clear that the author has deep concerns about the effect of media representation of women. The author expresses concern that her images “should not contribute to pervasive negative and harmful representations” (p. 173), yet when she asks her subjects to respond to these images, she asks them to accept the categories she has created and write about how they or a former teacher of theirs fit those stereotypes. I don’t understand how this approach serves either to test the adequacy of her categories or to invite research subjects to produce media critical personal narratives. It seems to me that an absence of critical contrast (or alternative voices) makes the reinforcing of stereotypes inevitable.

I also have serious concerns (that go beyond this example) with the use of collage in research. Collage technique is an enormously powerful and appropriate technique for visually grounded critical inquiry. Brockelman (2001) would go so far as to argue that with its strong connection to the mass media and its internal tension between unified and fragmented discourse, collage can function as the defining metaphor for the relationship between modernity and postmodernism. The theoretical texts in the art world that focus on collage as central to issues of representation, critical discourse, and change (Bürger, 1984; Krauss, 1999) are key texts in exploring the relationship between art and social understanding. At the same time, collage as a process is simple. All that is required is glue, scissors, and a few magazines. However, to take collage beyond the level of untheorized first discoveries and to make these works readable requires the artist-researcher commit to a process of selecting and organizing grounded in articulated theory and aesthetics. For this process to be valid as research, I believe that the researcher-artist must claim our confidence by demonstrating both a commitment to and theoretical understanding of visual selecting and organizing. Finlay describes a years-long process of flipping through magazines and taking notes that has led her to the decisions behind her collages, but she doesn’t offer any insight into her selection process or her critical strategies. Her concern about the challenge of successfully countering media representations is well founded. Photographer Cindy Sherman, as just one example, has used her body and self-portraiture to confound these same media stereotypes. The progressively more horrific imagery in a monumental 30-year body of work speaks to Sherman’s frustration in even attempting to divert the force of the media’s visual momentum.

The five collages Finlay features in her multimedia clip are all figures made from media fragments. Their structure and relationship with the accompanying music are the point where Finlay’s purposes and methods begin to develop some clarity for me. I think that if the text focused only on these images and the visual and social theory that led to them, Finlay’s work would be far more coherent. It may be that by trying to make her total contribution look more like typical educational research, with interviews and an explicit focus on the classroom, she was diverted from her primary research relationship, which is with images in the print media. I sympathize with the pressure in the academy to do the work that is “expected,” rather than the work that I am good at. Again, we return to the need for new definitions of rigor.

In pairing Finlay's work with that of Knowles and Thomas I create a critical contrast. For arts-based research to take a meaningful place in the field of education it is important that artist-researchers make the necessity of their processes as explicit as the rigorous connection to the art worlds that inform them. Art, particularly the art of young children, has developed into a precious safety zone. Although it is perhaps appropriate to support young children's first visual works with positive comments and admiring silence, even at the undergraduate level arts classrooms can be some of the most bluntly challenging on campus. Critical discourse is part of the culture of art worlds. We cannot afford to be precious with arts-based research if by being silent and supportive we miss the important opportunity to confirm the role arts-based research should play in education.

Finally, I comment on the CD. The idea of an anthology of multimedia research is critical to this process. The basic look of the CD is clear and comfortably professional. The visual elements are consistently clear. Unfortunately, the audio elements (always the biggest challenge in a live video shoot) are uneven, but I would like to focus on one visual choice. A recurring visual motif throughout the CD is a partial dissolve montage. Many of the performances were videotaped live using two or three cameras. The production company (which although credited is not listed as a research partner) has chosen in virtually every case where there is a live performance to show two camera angles simultaneously as overlapping, semitransparent images. Combined with the jerky rhythm that results from the moderate frames-per-second of a Quicktime movie format, these visual choices result in an aesthetically interesting visual syncopation that is effective in adding a professional polish and density to what might, in at least some cases, have been a fairly visually uninspiring lecture or studio session. This visual style must be considered an editorial decision that affects each research example. Is this added visual complexity meaningful? Why is this technique used in every example of digital video? Is it meaningful in the same way every time it is used? Why did some authors opt out of this and go for a still slide show with sound, or even an exclusively audio presentation? Or is this visual choice just about entertainment? Are we as media saturated viewers so impatient with visual plainness that we wouldn't tolerate boring production values long enough to get at the meaning of the research? Should the production company be lauded for developing elegant visual solutions to the aesthetic challenges posed by the medium of the digital movie and the material of presentations given at conferences? Or should they be criticized for imposing a layer of commercial slickness on the data?

The fact that there is no discussion anywhere in either the print text or CD about the meaning of these choices is a serious flaw in this publication. Whether you want to think of it as a curatorial voice or a methodological voice, there is a complete absence of any overarching critical discourse with regard to the form and therefore the meaning of this collection of work. It is appropriate at first to experience visual work visually, but in the long run evocative work becomes meaningful on many levels and in many intellectual modes. I think that the critical silence of the editors in this text does a disservice to all these examples of arts-based research. The choices they made in grouping work into

categories and the choices they made with regard to the CD production all constitute important critical positions in the still young discourse about the significance of arts-based research. If the field of education is to embrace this kind of research, it will be because of a growing understanding of the new rigor behind the work. Much of this new rigor will come from the art worlds that continue to explore the quality and meaningfulness of their chosen forms. By introducing arts-based methods these researchers are bringing the richness of this problem-that-is-not-to-be-solved into the field of education. It is critical that arts-based educational researchers learn to recognize and communicate about the details of their processes so that educational research can strike a more subtle balance between reason and freedom (Madigan).

Remember Icebox Man? One of his other tactics was to take a Polaroid photograph of the contents of his fridge so that he could make his big snacking decisions without wasting electricity and ruining food: a clever, technological-savvy solution to a problem. Arts-based research can offer worlds of savvy solutions to the need in educational research for subtle, complex, and human approaches to inquiry and representation. In this review I touch on only two examples of 12 in *Dancing the Data*. Despite its flaws, Carl Bagley and Mary Beth Cancienne have offered a text that in many forms takes an important, brave, and expansive first step toward describing the new rigor.

Note

1. In *The Modern Project to Rigor: Descartes to Nietzsche*, Madigan (1986) explores a theme that is almost a commonplace in postmodern critique. What are the historical limits to the intellectual legacies of the Enlightenment? Madigan's contribution is to focus this question on a concept that is central to the academy, *rigor*. His text focuses on Nietzsche and the challenges of balancing reason and freedom. In arguing for the now predictable turn toward a complication and multiplication of the idea of rigor, Madigan provides us with a richly extended critical etymology of this important, and in the academy sometimes oppressive, concept.

References

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