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## PROVOKED BY ART: A RETROSPECTIVE<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** In 1996, while at a conference in New York City, I happened upon an art exhibit that changed the trajectory of my academic career. In this article, I recount part of my experience of engaging with the installation art of Edward and Nancy Reddin Kienholz and its transformative impact on my scholarly work. I reflect on some of the ways in which that chance moment unleashed my latent frustrations about the hegemonic conventions of academic research and inspired a path of possibilities for how social science research could be more meaningful in the lives of individuals and communities. I conclude with a note on the importance of open-mindedness, imagination, and a respect for serendipity in inspiring creativity, informing and, possibly, transforming research.

**Keywords:** serendipity; accessibility; arts-informed research; installation art; Kienholz

## The Encounter

*Kienholz: A Retrospective* was the largest collection of the Kienholz' work ever exhibited in one place. One hundred twenty-four works—all freestanding, life-size sculptures, many in the tableau art form, of full-size reconstructed spaces, human forms, and assemblages of objects—filled three floors of the huge gallery. The vast physical and psychic space was animated with raw, realistic, often shocking, renditions of racism, domestic violence, poverty, child abuse, war, and all manner of oppression, human suffering, and societal pathos. I was immediately engaged—intellectually, emotionally, and even physically as I was, at times, lured to participate in the representations.

*The Wait* (1964–65). A figure of an old woman sits in a high back armchair in her living room. She is surrounded by things that define her now-small world: knitting in a basket at her feet, numerous framed family photographs on a table beside her, a (live) parakeet in a cage off to one side, and a (taxidermized) cat asleep on her lap. A large oval framed photograph of a man, presumably her dead husband, is centred on the age-stained wallpaper behind her. She sits in wait. The warm wave of nostalgia that washes over me turns cold on a closer look. The old woman's head is, in fact, a skull encased in a glass bottle; a framed photograph of a lovely and much younger woman is affixed to the bottle's upturned end. Around the woman's neck is a garland of smaller glass bottles each holding remnants of a once full and vibrant life. She is simultaneously weighed down and comforted by these memories as she grows old, alone, surrounded by decaying domesticity.

*The Illegal Operation* (1962). A cheap, tattered rug marks the scene of a sleazy, back street room where an illegal abortion has recently been performed. A rusted metal shopping cart, modified to serve as an operating table, is the focal point of the small space. On the lower shelf of the cart sits a rusty, blood-encrusted metal bedpan holding a set of bloody and corroded surgical instruments. Lying on the "bed" above the pan is a filthy sack of hardened cement ripped open at the lower end, its contents oozing onto the disgustingly dirty rags intended to catch the messy spill. A battered enamel pot holding unused tools, a galvanized bucket filled with hardened bloody rags, an old milking stool, and a household floor lamp with torn and blood-spattered lampshade are crowded together in the tight space defined by the rug. As "witness" to this horrific act I am at once driven to turn away in revulsion and compelled to stay and bear some responsibility for this heinous crime.

*Sollie 17* (1979–1980). A door standing ajar in the hallway of a cheap, residential hotel beckons me. Realizing that I am prey to the artists' intentions, I swallow my discomfort, at the same time recognizing a slight voyeuristic thrill, and move toward the door. I poke my head in and immediately invade the privacy of Sollie's confined and solitary world.

The hotel room is small, claustrophobic. A combination of dirty and personal hygiene items clutter the tiny sink and surround just inside the door; my first clue to the size and state of Sollie's world. The room is cell-like: an old metal bed with bare mattress is partially covered by a worn, stained blanket; a small, wooden chest of drawers holds a portable television, a couple of battered cooking pots and a few sundry items; a small, two-shelf, dented metal cabinet serves as a pantry. Cigarette butts spill onto the floor from a large standing ashtray. A piece of underwear hangs to dry on a short line strung across one corner of the room. The wallpaper is spattered and soiled from a lifetime of neglect; a dark stain in one corner near the ceiling evidences a persistent leak. Two low wattage, bare, incandescent bulbs provide dim light. A small window gives view to the outside world—brick walls, smokestacks, and rooftops in a rundown industrial area of a small city. A figure of an old man, skinny and hunched over, dressed only in a pair of briefs, is replicated twice; each figure a different depiction of loneliness and despair. He is lying on his bed reading a novel with a hand inside his underpants; he is sitting on the edge of the bed playing solitaire on the seat of a chair; he is standing looking out the window.

And on it went: a relentless reminder of the inequities and injustices that define our social condition; a blatant challenge to make it otherwise. One hundred twenty-one more encounters later I staggered out into the glare of softly fading daylight, indelibly marked by my experience of the past few hours. The work had its intended effect. My body felt ravaged; my emotions drained; my mind was in overdrive.

## The Connection

Part of the power of the Kienholz' art is in the demands it makes on viewers. As Ross (1996) said:

It is not the work's shocking truthfulness or the artists' willingness to explore intricate and delicate societal issues, nor is it merely their ability to create extreme dramatic impact through the use of assembled found objects. The Kienholz' works are forever lodged in our memory because they remain fresh wounds, scars that will never heal.... They remind us of the earnest limits of art and the requirements of civil life. (p. 22)

As a viewer I had worked hard; no part of me idle. I laughed and cried; I felt pain, revulsion, shame, pity; I remembered, imagined, denied, confessed, promised—all the while aware that, as a viewer, my role was significant. The artists' role was to fire me up—make me feel and think. They did their job and well. The rest was up to me. According to Ruskin (1996), Kienholz'

realism is our collective fears and the social responsibility from which [they] will not allow us to escape. We are invited to judge our present social condition and then we are begged, through a visual scream, to create another reality, one which celebrates human dignity. (pp. 42–43)

Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz salvaged and reassembled everyday objects discarded by ordinary people to explore, represent, and make bold cultural and political statements about societal conditions and contradictions. They relied on humour, absurdity, exaggeration, and distortion to draw the viewer into their work, sometimes physically as well as emotionally and intellectually. Playing on human inclinations toward voyeurism they often coerced the viewer to become an active participant in the representation. Forced to stand in line to gain entrance, climb on a stool to peer through a barred window, peek through a crack in a door left ajar, lift a young woman's skirt only to discover intimate objects concealed underneath in a small chest of drawers, viewers were at once victim and perpetrator, complicit in societal abuses and misdeeds.

For Edward and Nancy Kienholz, to be committed through art means to engage the beholder too—to surprise a person with an artistic device much as with a hello, and then to draw that person in...and better still to force the viewer to a position of self-identification. (Harten, 1996, p. 45)

I was captivated by the immediate accessibility of the Kienholz' work. They were interested in communicating about everyday issues with common materials easily recognized by and identified with ordinary people. Their art was described by Brooks and Hopps (1996) as "a visual poetry of the everyday .... [They] believed passionately that art should be accessible to everyone" (pp. 122, 115). Another reviewer and long-time follower of Edward Kienholz' art prior to his partnership with Nancy Reddin Kienholz stated that, "What [Edward] Kienholz was saying needed no higher translation, no cultural tastemakers or commissars to explain it. Indeed his meaning is painfully comprehensible" (Ruskin, 1996, p. 42). The words of Richard Jackson (1996), a lifelong friend of Edward Kienholz, resounded most loudly for me: "The thing I like about Ed and Nancy's art", he said, "is that it's real democratic. It doesn't take a PhD to understand it. So it kind of spoke to everyone. Not highbrow or exclusive" (p. 283).

## The Commitment

The conference: well, I know I was there attending sessions, listening to presentations and making some of my own, meeting with colleagues, and engaging in all the usual conference activities. And I know that this conference was supposedly a gathering of the "latest and greatest" in educational research, the "biggest and best" names in the field, the "who's who and what's what" in educational theory and research. But, when the plane left the runway to take me home, most of what had transpired at the conference remained on the tarmac. Words, spoken and penned by academics, who worked so hard to achieve just the right scientific ring, were wrung dry of life—of emotion, of sensuality, of physicality. With the extraction of life juices, the words became too light to take hold. As hot air turns water to vapour, the words evaporated into thin air. My experience at the Whitney, however, was more like a dense, early summer Maritime fog that seeps its way into the bones. And, if you've grown up along the coast of the North Atlantic, it is as though fog is part of your molecular make-up. It settles in your body, deeply and completely.

Provoked by art, I returned to my university work, then located at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, with eyes opened and mind spinning with prospects and possibilities for rendering research in ways that mattered. If I were to make a difference through my work I could no longer rely on the very limited power of flaccid words and numbers. I needed words plump and dripping with life juice, compelling and evocative images, representations that drew readers and viewers in to experience the research "text." Readers of research needed to be moved to feel and think and to be inspired in some way by their experience. It was my job to invite that kind of encounter. It was my job to more fully portray the complexities of the human condition to broader audiences, and to invite even an approximation of the kind of holistic, full-bodied engagement I had experienced through art. Research, like art, could be accessible, evocative, embodied, empathic, provocative.

## The Action

Sharing my experience and impassioned commitment with a few like-minded faculty members and graduate students ignited a spark. Hungry for opportunities to challenge conventions of academic research and make a difference through our work, a group of about ten of us gathered regularly in an off-campus space over food to envision the possibilities of informing our research with art and artistry. What could that look like? How would we theoretically frame such an undertaking? What were some of the many challenges we would encounter? What would it require of us to take on such a

project? The more we talked, the stronger grew our individual and collective commitment and the Artful Inquiry Working Group was formed.

Over the next couple years, we experimented with form individually and collaboratively and workshopped our artful research first within the Working Group and gradually to interested others. Through these explorations and discussions, clarity of thought developed, our community grew, and the spark was fanned into a flame which quickly spread to a blaze. My colleague, Gary Knowles, and I began to articulate what we called arts-informed research methodology, incorporating it into our teaching, thesis supervision, academic writing, and our own research. By 2000, several of the graduate students, who had joined the expanded Working Group, successfully completed master's and doctoral theses that, in form and process, combined sound scholarship with artistry which prompted Lorri Neilsen, in her external examiner's report on one of the doctoral theses, to coin the term "scholartistry." During that same period, members of the Working Group individually and collaboratively, presented their scholartistry at conferences, developed funding proposals, and published in the few academic venues available at the time to support such work.

The year 2000 was a milestone for the Working Group. With the confidence earned since the inception of the Group, in recognition of all that we had learned and accomplished, and the unwavering passion to continue to develop and support the role of the arts in research, the Centre for Arts-informed Research was established. Launched with institutional support and much fanfare, the Centre's mission was to articulate, explore, and support alternative forms of qualitative research and representation which fuse elements, processes, and forms of the arts into scholarly work. The Centre community grew to include national and international scholars who variously participated in colloquia, workshops, seminars, exhibits of artistic scholarship, thesis research presentations, and in a series of books on arts-informed research.<sup>2</sup> It was a decade of exhilarating learning and productivity, of community building, and of hope for the prospects of wider systemic change.

The work of the Working Group and Centre for Arts-informed Research was not conducted in a vacuum. At about the same time as the Working Group formed, a small number of other researchers in North America were actively questioning some of the assumptions underpinning qualitative research methodologies and arguing for more inclusive and equitable research practices that honoured a variety of modes and forms of knowing. In 1993, in a distinguished Presidential Address to the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Elliott Eisner speculated that the future of educational research would witness an expanding array of research methods to acknowledge and account for the range of forms and modes of understanding that comprise human development. That address, the formation of interest groups focused

on the role of the arts in research, and a modest increase in acceptance of “alternative” research for publication in scholarly journals set the stage for growth and change of which the Centre for Arts-informed Research was a part.

## **Back to Me, the Non-artist**

I in no way define myself as an artist. I do, however, value creativity and the role of imagination, and aspire to imbue my life and work with creativity. Early on in my academic career, I became disillusioned by the language and conventions of what counted as scholarship in the academy, the real-life value of social science research, and how it was not typically set up to reach everyday people and to make a difference in the lives of individuals and communities. On that day in 1996, when I stumbled upon the work of Edward Kienholz and Nancy Reddin Kienholz, my visit was without express purpose or expectation. I knew, however, that I had a deep-seated dissatisfaction with the tenets of research predominating the academy and I yearned for change. True to my tendency towards non-conformity, I had challenged those conventions in small ways but was ready to do more. What and how I did not know.

The Kienholz Retrospective created the space for my imagination, emotion, and intellect to engage in overdrive. Research, as I mentioned, would and could never look the same for me again. But how could I, a non-artist, translate my experience into action? An interesting and inspiring feature of the Kienholz exhibit was a series of what Kienholz called “concept tableaux.” Engraved brass plaques, mounted as part of the exhibit, described in detail Kienholz’ conceptualization of future works. Each was entitled and with purpose and political underpinnings clearly articulated along with the imagined site of the work. Construction materials and costs were included and the concept as envisioned was available to purchase. The idea of creating a variation on the concept tableaux stuck with me. It served as a starting place to envision possibilities for how to represent research by drawing on the installation art form that I knew had such power.

Back at the university, as I completed a research project on teacher education reform, I struggled to find evocative ways to represent the experiences that the teacher educators had shared with me. The predominant themes that emerged from the research were poignant and deserved more than words to communicate their experiences. I took my challenge, my experience of Kienholz’ work, and the idea of the concept tableaux back to the Artful Inquiry Working Group. I could envision an installation that represented the themes but did not have the artistic capacity to actualize my ideas. Brainstorming and creative conversations with members of the Group led to a collaborative creation of a three-part installation entitled Living in

Paradox: A Multi-media Representation of Teacher Educators' Lives in Context (Cole, 2010; Cole, Knowles, brown, & Buttignol, 1999a,b,c,d,e,f).

At about the same time, my research partner, Maura McIntyre, and I had embarked on a study of the experience of caregiving for family caregivers who were caring for a loved one with dementia. We wanted our work to be meaningful to family caregivers as well as to help educate the general public about dementia and care. Once again, inspired by the installation art form and the use of everyday relatable objects as a way of engaging audiences, we began to experiment using the idea of the concept tableaux as a planning device to represent themes that were emerging from our research. Between 1999 and 2010, along with 9 performances (but that's a story for another time), we created 20 installations that we exhibited in 12 locations across Canada, both public and academic (see, for example, Cole, 2017; Cole & McIntyre, 2006, 2008, 2010).

Inspired by the comments of Richard Jackson (1996) on the Kienholz' work as "democratic", "not highbrow or exclusive" (p. 283) and easily understood by everyone, Maura and I aspired for our work to be received in a similar way. In creating the installations, we used the "everyday" and "ordinary" as our guides. By foregrounding symbols of the ordinary routines of caregiving, we dignified the domestic and paid tribute to the people who persevere in the daily acts of care. Using familiar and easily recognizable symbols to represent our research also made the work accessible across age, culture, and circumstance. When the work was mounted for display in public venues, we were able to spend time and be with our research in community. From the moment we arrived at an exhibit location and began unscrewing the plywood crates that stored the exhibit, people who passed by—the shopkeeper, the crossing guard, the cleaner—were curious and began asking questions and telling stories. Because so many of the materials that we used in the exhibit were cross-culturally comfortable and familiar (card tables and laundry), and because the objects cut across class divides (refrigerator doors and snapshots), people generally seemed comfortable to approach us and our work. They "got" the research messages and were provoked to engage, reflect, and connect with their own experiences in a more considered way. Because neither of us identified as an artist, although both creative, we were able to be inspired by but not constrained by the conventions of the installation art form. It was not our intention to create fine works of art; it was our intention to draw on an art form to make our work more meaningful and accessible.

## The Power and Possibilities of Serendipity

Serendipitous moments are part of life experience and, in some cases, can be life-changing. The key is to recognize those chance encounters as opportunities. When that happens, a creative spark is ignited and serendipity and creativity become intertwined. Typically, when thinking about research and the conventions of a carefully planned design and tightly controlled process, there is little room for serendipity; yet, chance encounters can lead to creativity and transformation within a research context. Careful conceptualization and planning of a research project is a necessary starting point; however, strict adherence to that plan can limit the possibilities of the research. Being responsive and open to surprise, having a tolerance for ambiguity, and a capacity to let go of strict control over every aspect of a plan creates a space for the research to unfold instead of being tied up in a tightly bound package.

Although not widely reported due to the scientific standards of certainty and objectivity, serendipity has played and continues to play a significant role in scientific discoveries and other creative processes (Kennedy, Whitehead, & Ferdinand-James, 2022; Ross, 2025). Ross (2025) acknowledged that a chance encounter on its own does not inspire creativity. She asserted that it is the dynamic interaction between an accidental or chance encounter and an individual's noticing and acting on that encounter that defines a role for serendipity in creativity. Put another way, choreographer, Twyla Tharp (2003) noted that luck or chance plays a significant role in the creative process but requires being ready for what the chance encounter offers.

Soon after my return from the conference, I had a conversation with my former, now late, thesis supervisor and mentor in which I recounted my experience at the Whitney and its impact on me. The next day he handed me a book, *Free Play, Improvisation in Life and Art* by Stephen Nachmanovitch (1990). On the inside cover page, he had written,

“To Ardra  
Free Play  
Just do it!  
Love, Dave”.

The book is now well-used with tattered post-it notes marking dog-eared pages. Even now, when I take it from the shelf, I do so with the same sense of gratitude I felt when I received it. To me, it was a gesture of support for the journey on which I was about to embark. Perhaps it was also an expression of generativity (Erikson, 1983) that Dave knew I would value. Many of Nachmanovitch's words have inspired and guided me over the years. The statement, “Creativity can replace conformity as the primary mode of social being” (p. 189) still serves as a refrain of hope.

Open-mindedness, imagination, and creating a space to allow for serendipity are vital to realizing the potential of chance encounters to inform and, possibly, transform research. A serendipitous visit to an art gallery turned out to be a transformative moment for me. It unleashed my latent frustrations about the hegemonic conventions of academic research and inspired a path of possibilities for how social science research could be more meaningful in the lives of individuals and communities.

Aesthetic encounters open spaces in consciousness; they offer a sense of a receding horizon, a reaching out for a completion that always eludes somehow. It is this effort to reach beyond, to fill the space or the emptiness that often gives rise to the desire...to transform, to render existence more tolerable, more vital, more humane. (Greene, 2009, p. 5)

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## ENDNOTES

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1. A version of the beginning section of this article was originally published in *Provoked by Art* (Cole, 2004).
2. The Art of Inquiry Series includes in chronological order:  
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