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**Barry, Hedwig; Andrew, David**

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# A RETURN TO PRACTICES AND PEDAGOGIES: ARTISTIC RESEARCH AS UNTETHERING AND FORAGING

HEDWIG BARRY
INDEPENDENT ARTIST
HEDWIGBARRY@GMAIL.COM

DAVID ANDREW
DEPARTMENT OF FINE ARTS,
SCHOOL OF ARTS,
UNIVERSITY OF THE WITWATERSRAND
DAVID.ANDREW@WITS.AC.ZA

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This paper reflects on the intertwining of artistic research and pedagogies within the context of a collaborative project conducted at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The authors explore the concepts of proximities, grids and flows, confrontations, and time as entry points into the space of artistic research. They emphasize the importance of untethering and foraging, challenging established boundaries and embracing discomfort as a catalyst for creative growth. The paper also highlights the significance of proximities and the relational aspect of artistic research, inviting a communal and interdisciplinary approach. The authors reflect on their experiences during the pandemic and the evolving nature of teaching and learning in relation to time.

## Introduction

In January 2020 we presented a joint paper-conversation that emerged from the process of conducting (Barry) and supervising (Andrew) an MA Fine Arts research project in 2019 in the School of Arts at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. In the paper-conversation we reflected on practices and pedagogies and the place of desire in these processes. The 2020 presentation anticipated the focus of the 2022 conference by focusing on how artistic research informs pedagogies and how pedagogies inform artistic research. In this nexus ,we tried to understand desire as a generative presence in several ways. Our collaboration is grounded in a shared interest in practices that understand the affordances of multimodal situatedness as a perpetual openness to the motile, a space of motion that is as spontaneous as it is deliberate and often digressionary. Simultaneously, our collaboration is about the serious play in the intersecting spaces of enquiry and knowledge production and, importantly, those spaces beyond the academy. Our ongoing collaboration is an example of the heightened pedagogy-practice relationship we seek to imagine more broadly.



Figure 1: Hedwig Barry and David Andrew in conversation, Arts Research Africa International Conference, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa (January 2020)

In the 2020 paper, we focused on what we understood to be the digressionary trajectories of the supervisory process and its diverse methodological groundings. At the same time, we were committed to understanding the nature of artistic research within specific contexts and the kind of rigour present in this form of research – a rigour that often follows a logic unlike that informing other disciplines (Maharaj 2009) and that may be incommensurable with those established in the Global North and the westernised university (Grosfoguel et al. 2016). We considered how an aim might be something that emerges through process rather than being distinctly present at the outset. And we imagined pedagogical spaces that were embodied (Stein 2007, Spatz 2015) and capable of entertaining desires (Bal 2002), the erotic and love (hooks 2000). Active metaphors embedded in Barry's practice, such as untethering and foraging, were foregrounded in the research and supervision, in conversation with ideas of proximity, confrontation, grids and flows and time.



Figure 2: Hedwig Barry, NIROX Foundation Sculpture Park, Gauteng, South Africa (2022)

During the pandemic period (2020–22), both of us continued to practice. Barry began to prepare for PhD studies and completed residencies at the NIROX Foundation Sculpture Park (December 2021–March 2022) and at the Debeden Research Centre located at the Tswalu Nature Reserve (May–August 2022). These residencies included some form of teaching activity.



Figure 3: Hedwig Barry, Debeden Research Centre, Tswalu Nature Reserve, Northern Cape, South Africa (2022)

Andrew continued to supervise, teach, research and make. The supervision included PhD creative research projects that explored notions of paradise in a late capitalist world, the re-orienting of human-oceanic relations, thinking with stone in a post-extractive Johannesburg landscape, and radical understandings of embodied techniques in contemporary South African dance. Each of these projects involved the student working with a supervisory team in a way that enabled motile possibilities for methods of untethering and foraging to emerge. The supervision also contributed to Andrew's ongoing thinking on artistic research practices and pedagogy. Concurrently, Andrew's drawing practice returned to the *Provoking the Avalanche* series initiated in Sierre, Switzerland, in 2003 and continued until 2009.

The presence of the avalanche as a pedagogical and socio-political emblem became a site of theorising through the making process, similar to Barry's theorising of ground/lessness and grids and flows in her works on paper. In these works, Barry

builds up finely layered linear elements to create a surface akin to a loose weave of material that is then interrupted by more curvilinear elements that roam across and through the lightly held grid.

The 2022 conference presentation afforded us the opportunity to reflect anew on artistic research and pedagogies. In the discussion that follows, we treat confrontations and proximities as generative nodes or presences in our respective practices. Importantly, we understand pedagogical work as practice. As we noted in 2020, the intertwining – through, in that instance, the mediums of filmic and painting installation – of pedagogies, practices and desires, enabled a shift in how the spaces of teaching and learning were understood, whether in the classroom or in less formal spaces. We draw together two conference experiences in returning to Mieke Bal's appreciation of the qualities necessary for teaching; to quote from our 2020 paper-conversation:

A teacher needs to know how not to know. I am a teacher. One of the joys of that profession is literally to see thought emerge into clarity and shed its initial fuzziness … the proximity, indeed, the intimacy of a person, the student, struggling with thoughts struggling to have her think them, to recall Bollas' "unthought known," of a person skilled and knowing not to know, is an eminently fertile situation for the combination of creativity and interaction that distinctively characterises cultural analysis. (2002, 286–287)

It is in this space of the "[needing] how not to know" that we have continued to explore what it means to work as artists, researchers and educators over the last two years. Through our reflection on the intertwining of pedagogies and artistic research, we have identified four concepts for the purposes of this paper around which our thoughts continue to gather, pause and disperse:

1. Proximities
2. Grids and flows
3. Confrontations
4. Time

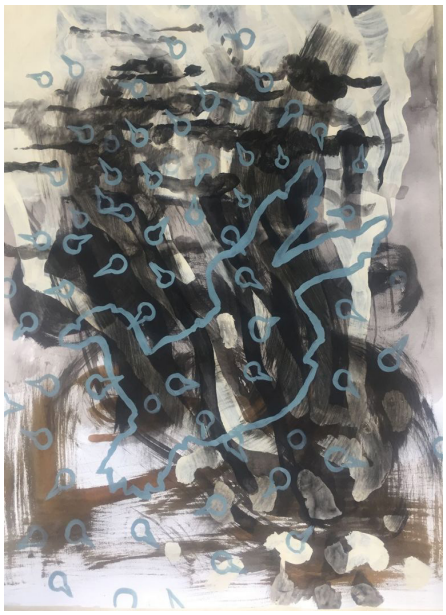


Figure 4: David Andrew, *Making Sense of Small Things – Provoking the Avalanche No.18*, mixed media on Fabriano paper, 100cm x 70cm (2020)



Figure 5: Hedwig Barry, *Grid II*, pencil and ink on Fabriano paper, 28cm x 19cm (2022)

We engage with these concepts and the notions of untethering and foraging to address a question to which we return in this paper, namely: What is it that we are able to learn and understand from and about artistic research? The four concepts are less methodological anchors and more entry points into the space of oscillation and rupture that characterises artistic research. They appear as threads present in our ongoing collaboration that we are now able to recognise more readily. Importantly, we can see more clearly how and when they manifest as digressionary moments, for it is in heightened awareness and openness to such moments that we become more receptive to emergent possibilities. In this space of critical reflection our practices of teaching, researching and making pose further questions for us; they look back at us in the closest of proximities to confront and challenge.

## 1. Proximities

Barry's foraging methodologies have led her to Jean-Luc Nancy's notion of "being with" (2000), a relational understanding that encompasses singular-plural becoming and being. Foraging of this kind proceeds from a post-human instinct that man-

dates an intimacy with the becoming of an environment. Barry's 2022 residency at the Tswalu Nature Reserve allowed her to reflect on how her research practices were intertwined with contexts afforded by being in relation to a *being with* data, method, weather, researchers, herself, nature, environment, conservation, practice and animals. Such dialogical opportunities for being with are about a nearness in space, time and relationship that is a form of community enabling a certain motility integral to artistic research as a pedagogy and a practice. In thinking through the lens of proximity we ask ourselves how artistic research practices inform pedagogies and pedagogical spaces and vice versa, enabling us to theorise and practice in a much more irreverent way, while remaining open to bell hooks's exhortation: "[t]o truly love we must learn to mix various ingredients: care, affection, recognition, respect, commitment and trust as well as honest and open communication" (2000, 30).



Figure 6: Hedwig Barry, workshop with scientists and researchers, Dedeben Research Centre, Tswalu Nature Reserve, Northern Cape, South Africa (2019)

In the interlocutory spaces of artistic research and teaching and learning, the process is often about listening; it is about understanding the premise of the enquiry, the research, and where the interest is (leaning towards). Then there is always the period of allowing interlocutors to untether from constraints, imagined or real, and to extend their imaginations. Particularly in creative research, the inclination to untether and to forage *with* is a primary impulse for us. It can introduce spaces of discomfort and incommensurability (a space of not recognising something, of having to recalibrate one's sensibilities). And just as much as proximity happens in an infinity of different ways, no two student-supervisor processes or instances of artistic research are the same.

## 2. Grids and flows

The institution is grid-like to some, perhaps many. And, in several respects, the higher degree process has a grid-like existence, although artistic research practices render the grid more pliable, more mutable, encouraging the grid lines to dissolve at certain points and allow what is untethered to flow outside. The (partial) dissolution of boundaries introduces the interlocutors to spaces of not knowing. To have the inclination and capacity (and encouragement) to forage in the spaces of not knowing is not an antidote to discomfort. It rather enables an understanding of discomfort as explicated in Sara Ahmed's invitation to her readers to consider that "[d]iscomfort … allows things to move. Every experience I have had of pleasure and excitement about a world opening up has begun with such ordinary feelings of discomfort; of not quite fitting in a chair, of becoming unseated, of being left holding onto the ground" (2006, 154). Understanding the grid and its receptivity to flow in this way enables a recognition of and a working with discomfort. In the untethering, the flow is precipitated and one creates one's own structural system – something grid-like but not bound by the logic of the grid – that is not constrained to a structure of orthodoxy (Maharaj 2009). We often associate untethering with the acts of foraging, an openness to a wide-ranging connecting with what may cohere but also disrupt. This encapsulates a certain hedging of bets or entertaining of multiple possibilities as an artist-researcher-supervisor-educator. There is something about sifting, changing and adapting as a forager. This is exemplified in Barry's ever-present foraging tables and notebooks – gatherings of objects, notes, miscellanea – that in a fashion similar to her drawings, signal a grid of sorts, but one that is permeable and motile.

## 3. Confrontations



Figure 7: Hedwig Barry, foraging table in artist's studio, NIROX Sculpture Park, Gauteng, South Africa (2022)

Barry thinks about untethering in two ways: her first visit to the Tswalu Nature Reserve Research Centre in 2019 involved, in part, confronting scientists with the proposition: "If we untether your research from the systems that are present, what affordances emerge?" Barry's sense was that scientific researchers remained within very strict parameters for extended periods of time before they felt they could explore in more speculative or imaginative ways. Such an observation is not a dismissal of these internal logics and methodologies, but rather reflects a meshing of profound respect for these often repetitive, iterative processes and an invitation to dare to embrace inter/multi/trans/post-disciplinarity perspectives, to enable a more communal prompting and an untethering of methodologies and data (even momentarily), to be in a space of not knowing. And a not knowing together, where negotiation and mixing are present.

The second way is in the imagining of a becoming of sorts – a living entity, being confined and constrained. With the removal of the constraint, untethering is possible. This is not to say that constraints are necessarily bad – it is more about understanding the limits and affordances of constraints and what lies beyond these constraints. Confrontation may conduce to the most extraordinary discoveries, but it can also mean stepping back and pausing. Understanding the discomfort present in a state of confrontation induced by that which is unfamiliar is, for Barry, about not looking away. Returning to Barry's residency at the Tswalu Nature Reserve, a compulsion present in her multiple practices was to engage in relationship building rather than in only making artworks. She reflects on being an artist interloper whose practice is about creating a space of immersion for herself and for the researchers based at the research centre. The method was one of placing herself purposefully in a space of discomfort, a place of unfamiliarity.



Figure 8: Hedwig Barry, foraging table in artist's studio, Dedeben Research Centre, Tswalu Nature Reserve, Northern Cape, South Africa (2022)

In our pedagogical practices, we often reserve space for irreverence, disobedience and even disaffection. There is a great deal in Barry's practice that is premised on forms of mischief and disobedience. This is in part a reaction to her own experiences of formal education, where conformity and adherence to a grid-like imposition of rules and norms were required. Understanding her situated practices, a key principle of multimodal theory, and the resources that someone brings, including pedagogical resources, some not recognised by the student, are key in the interlocutory supervisory practice we imagine. What are the pedagogies that are part of the situated practices that are brought to artistic research? Some of these may be quite damaging pedagogies, but they unwittingly encourage disobedience.

The institutional hierarchy that places the supervisor above the student is ever-present. But we allow for these hierarchies to be interchangeable, where at times the supervisor is the learner – for instance, when the researcher/student can own and speak back to their own material. Maybe a capacity to confront hierarchies in a more nuanced way enables a different kind of proximity located in trust and vulnerability.

## 4. Time

One of the things that teaching and supervising under pandemic conditions asked us to consider is the relationship of time to learning and practice more broadly. Often teaching and learning is premised on having a number of students and a timetabled period of time with material content and/or processes that need to be

covered in this time. While we understand the need for some degree of efficient utilisation of time and associated resources, it became clear that there was a need to be more alert to a different kind of rhythm and receptivity to duration. Andrew has always been interested in how a more relational aesthetics demanded a durational engagement (e.g. so-called durational artworks). He has always been sceptical and suspicious of artworks that "parachute in," as opposed to artworks that are perhaps lower profile but are present for weeks, months, years. If you consider the classroom as a work of art (understood in a multiplicity of ways), the modality is necessarily durational. It is not always a space of comfort. It is sometimes a difficult, incommensurable space. But it is a space in which that incommensurability can be navigated, where solutions are not paramount and a measure of playing out can be entertained.



Figure 9: Researchers and scientists field work, Tswalu Nature Reserve, Northern Cape, South Africa

In his introduction to *Decolonizing the Westernized University*, Ernesto Velasquez refers to the work of Nassim Noroozi who, writing on the "pedagogy of time," argues that:

> this endeavor – what she calls pedagogy of time – aims to disrupt what regulates students' and readers' economies of knowledge without appointing conclusive end points for this disruption. Pedagogy of time does not aim for oversimplified and hurried theoretical reflections. As such, it is committed to critically confront politics of speed in thinking. (Velasquez 2016, xiv)

In our experience, artistic research practice diffracts, meanders and digresses, not following a linear trajectory in time or in learning, and seeks to accommodate the deepening and slowing down described by Noroozi. We are interested in how this understanding speaks to teaching and learning, including supervision. We ask how the premise of artistic research as imagined in this paper is enacted in teaching and learning and supervision, and we conclude that the supervision of creative practice higher degrees invites an increase in proximity and intimacy, being-with. This would seem to demand a different conception of time, one that acknowledges that "the idea of time as uniform succession needs to be opposed 'in the name of a time which is reversible, intermittent, episodic, various and variable, pluriform, relative, relational, and, importantly, finite'" (Beech et al. 2016, 8). In an issue that the PARSE Journal devoted to scrutinising time in the practices of artists, the editors note how "[a]rtists across disciplines have the advantage of shuffling, overcoming, undermining, fictionalising time" (Beech et al. 2016, 11). These are descriptors that we find useful in understanding how artistic research and pedagogies work together.



Figure 10: David Andrew, installation from the *Misc (Recovery Room)* exhibition at the Standard Bank Gallery, Johannesburg, South Africa (2009)

## Thoughts from the Untethered Foraging Table

As a conclusion of sorts, we return to one of Barry's foraging tables, an inevitable presence in the many studio/work spaces she creates in what is often a necessarily peripatetic practice. We invite the reader to imagine such a foraging table as a mixture of objects and as what Andrew refers to as dispositions. His ongoing artistic research interests lie in the nexuses of pedagogies and practice. He has referred to a dispositional set as a requirement for the teaching and learning space to become an artwork (Andrew 2011). He lists the following as dispositions:

Less anxious creativity
Make shifting
A leaning towards

Ambulatory thinking and acting
Embodied reflection
Playfulness
Risk-taking and rules
Awareness of affordance
Situated practices and
Making public.
(2011, 205)

Andrew argues that this dispositional set as a presence in the classroom as work of art (Guattari 1996) allows students to theorise and practice in more irreverent ways.

But perhaps what is absent is the necessary confrontation that recognises the incommensurable as being integral to the durational processes imagined and experienced. It is in such practice and pedagogy that Barry's attraction to the motile possibilities in methods of untethering and foraging can find expression. Teaching, making, researching flow together inseparably.

The receptivity to digressionary openness that we characterise above is directly related to Barry's interest in the formal and conceptual presence of what she refers to as "the margin for error" (Barry 2020). In our conversations, we have often referenced Carmen Mörsch's letter titled "Take the Terror out of Error" (2009), which draws on the work of queer theorists Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Patty Lather. We like to think of entertaining "the margin for error" as a further delighting in and extension of the injunction to take the terror out of error. Barry's interest in the margin for error as a visual trope stems from her work at the Tswalu Nature Reserve Research Centre where she often thought through the notion of the margin for error in research with scientists. Barry's compulsion has always been to keep her practice open to all interlocutors (see earlier reference to the notion of "being with"), an openness that lies at the heart of her regard for the value of research that is inter/trans/multi and post-disciplinary. The literal, visual margins in Barry's work take on a presence akin to something more adjustable – the more malleable line of the grid noted above, that allows for flow. Or the weave of a carpet inclined towards unravelling. The margin for error finds itself as a visual and physical presence in her drawings and sculptural installations, most notably, *Love Letter for the Lost Travellers* (2021), where a prominent red vertical line positions itself on the left side of the installation. While it asserts itself on the wall of the location for this outdoor public piece, it also becomes emblematic of spaces of tension where a spectrum of proximities and confrontations is present. In this spectrum of proximities and confrontations, artistic research asserts itself as pedagogy and practice.

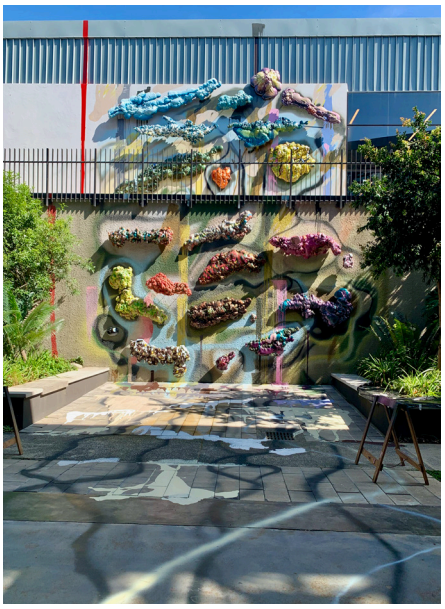


Figure 11: Hedwig Barry, *Love Letter for the Lost Travellers*, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, BMW Midrand Campus, Gauteng, South Africa (2021)

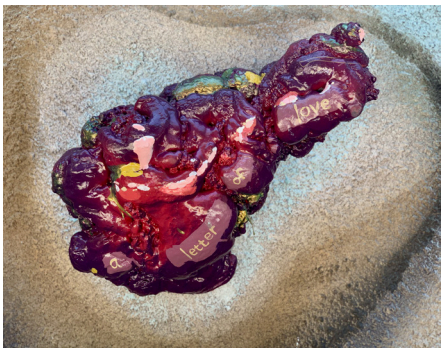



Figure 12: Hedwig Barry, *Love Letter for the Lost Travellers*, detail, mixed media installation, dimensions variable, BMW Midrand Campus, Gauteng, South Africa (2021)

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