

Art, Work, Art Work

PIP ADAM

Abstract

Novelist Pip Adam reflects on the processes involved in three of her recent projects: a novel, *The New Animals* (2017); a community newspaper and art project; and her educational work in creative writing classes in prisons. Drawing on Raymond Williams and Kenneth Goldsmith, Adam considers the relationship between the work of art and the work involved in producing art, and consider some of the ways in which the language of creativity and inspiration may undermine democratic energies.

In the introduction to *Culture and Society*, Raymond Williams demonstrates how a number of words took on new meaning in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. He identifies five words that are the key points from which a map of these changes in language can be formed. One of these five words is “art.” Williams points out that where an *art* had formerly been any human skill, it now signified a particular group of skills, “the ‘imaginative’ or ‘creative’ arts.” That “*art* came to stand for a special kind of truth, ‘imaginative truth,’ and *artist* for a special kind of person.”¹

In his 2011 book, *Uncreative Writing*, Kenneth Goldsmith makes a case that in the 21st century, with easy access to technologies that allow us to copy, paste, re-order and publish, conventional ideas of originality and quality in literature are being disrupted. Goldsmith cites literary projects where “writers function more like programmers” and where groups of people work anonymously together to “move language from one place to another.”²

My presentation investigates how three literary projects I have been involved with sit in relation to contemporary ideas of art, originality and the figure of the artist. My interest is in the degree to which the shift in meaning which Williams identifies after the industrial revolution has been undone by the technological revolution. I want to explore if the way Goldsmith claims technology has changed our ideas about originality and quality allows for a wider range of literary expression from a wider authorship, distributed to a wider readership. I would like to explore these ideas from my experience as a practitioner and facilitator in these projects, rather than as a researcher or academic.

Beginnings

As a practitioner, I would like to begin this discussion by explaining a little about how these ideas intersect with my personal experience as a writer and why I am attracted to Goldsmith’s idea that technology has enabled a definition of art which includes the utilization of labor outside creative and imaginative skills.

As a student at Otago University, I was accepted into a poetry writing paper. At the conclusion of the paper I met with my teacher to talk about my work. During that conversation he said to me, “You don’t have a lot of natural talent but you have some skill and that’s something.” The conversation happened a long time ago but it is a moment I have put some investment into remembering. Memory is a creative act, so I am not sure of the veracity of my recollection but I

am pretty sure he also said, I did not have enough natural ability to become a great writer but I worked hard and could probably get some personal enjoyment out of writing. At first this hurt me a great deal but I now believe it was a pivotal moment in my development as a writer and my writing process. I had always wanted to be a natural genius. I wanted to be like Byron walking alone only to be struck by perfectly formed lines that I simply wrote down to the rapturous applause of an impressed readership. But, more than that, I realised after being told I was not a natural genius that I wanted to be a writer. Even if that writing never left my journal. Before going to university, I had been a hairdresser. At the beginning of my apprenticeship I had also been told that I lacked natural ability, but by watching and practicing the skills of hairdressing I had built quite a good job for myself. And this was a good job for myself which I enjoyed a great deal. So I think I have always put a lot at stake in the work of writing. The skills that fall outside of the “imaginative” or “creative.” In my writing, I have utilized found texts, copied other writer’s structures, used rules to generate content, worked collaboratively and retold stories that move me. The three projects I would like to talk about today all come out of this skills-based development and practice. The first is one of the aspects of my latest novel *The New Animals*, the second is *The Made-Up Times*, produced as part of the Porirua People’s Library, and the third is a creative writing workshop run in two New Zealand correctional facilities.

***The New Animals* (2017)**

The New Animals is a novel set largely in one day last year. The timeframe was a structural solution to the fact that I do not really know how to write a novel. In my previous novel, I had used a fragmented structure to hide my inability to shift convincingly or seamlessly in time and space between one scene and the next. When I came to write *The New Animals*, I still did not have this ability, and I needed to solve another problem, which was that I did not have a lot of extended time to write the book. I was writing it in 15-minute intervals, squeezing it into tiny gaps in paid work. To solve both these problems I decided making the novel happen pretty much in real time would help with this erratic and interrupted writing schedule while also minimizing the length of the temporal and spatial leaps I had to make.

The book was set in Auckland, and although I grew up in Auckland and visited it often over the year, I lacked the imaginative skills to summon it in any believable or satisfying way. So, once the plot of the book was almost completely written, I decided I would visit Auckland and walk the novel through on a designated day. I would go where the characters went, when they went there in an attempt to record as much of Auckland as possible. The skills that I used to collect this information were not creative or imaginative. They were planning skills and recording skills. The work I had to do on that day was to walk and observe and capture. I like to think that the book was written in collaboration with Auckland on that day. Although I used my notebook some of the time, I think a lot of my belief that capturing a day was possible came from my interactions with technology. My phone is always with me and I can use it to photograph and record. When I grew up we had a camera that came out on special occasions. The photographs were not processed until the film was finished. But now photographs are instant; I use social media applications where I can watch someone’s day through pictures in real time. So I think this idea of capturing a day felt very technologically tied. I think in this way the technology allowed me to consider and use skills that could stand in when my imaginative skills failed me. I think in this way it allowed me to write a broader, stranger piece of fiction than I would have achieved if I had been left to my imaginative skills alone.

This novel ended up being published under my name by Victoria University Press. It is distributed for a price in book shops.

The two other projects I would like to discuss also resulted in publications, but these were both written by multiple people in environments outside what might be considered the mainstream literary community. Both publications were not sold, and the labour that went into producing them was unpaid. In this way they were distributed outside what might be considered the mainstream publishing industry. The projects differed in the way they used technology, but both used technology as part of their development or production.

Porirua People's Library

In November 2015, I was asked to join the Porirua People's Library (PPL) a collaborative story-telling and skill-sharing project.³ The People's Library began its life in the mind of Wellington artist Kerry Ann Lee. Lee was interested in what would happen if a community built the materials for a library from the ground up. What would happen if people were asked to produce, from scratch, the materials they thought were important for their communities? The first work of the People's Library took place as part of a Transitional Economic Zone (TEZA) in Porirua. The TEZA took place in vacant shops in the old Porirua Mall and artists worked with groups from the community on projects that explored new ways for a diversity of people to work together. During the time of the TEZA the PPL worked with people in Porirua to author and present their own stories and perspectives in new, thoughtful and creative ways. My own work during the TEZA was to produce an imaginary newspaper (*The Made-Up Times*) by asking people in the mall on a particular day to suggest headlines they would like to see on the cover of the *Dominion Post* the next day.

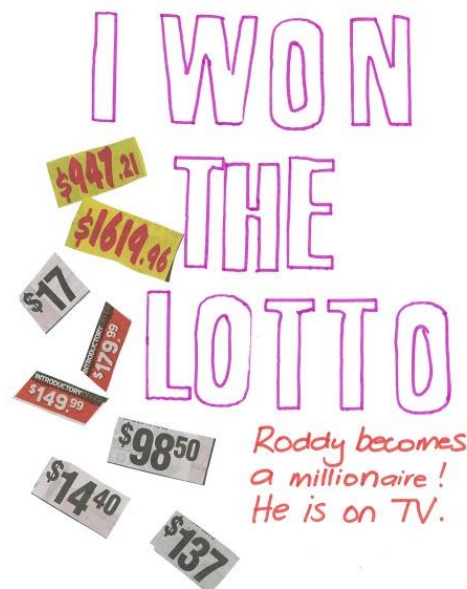
For six hours over two days I set up in Porirua Mall with drawing materials and paper and asked people in the mall to participate by designing a "front page" headline they'd like to see. While many did I also found that people were, obviously, very busy. So I adapted the process to asking people for their headlines as they walked past. Often I would shout at them, "What headline would you like to see?" and they would shout back their reply. I produced and designed pages myself, using these headlines.⁴



My hope for this project was that by using this exercise people could somehow voice what was important to them. I was hoping to get a snapshot of the concerns and hopes of the community through this game. I did not want participation to depend on imaginative or creative ability.

I hoped that by asking people to respond in the well-known language of the news headline, the labour would be put into exploring their hopes, not into formulating an original structure for the articulation of these hopes. We were not concerned with producing an original form. The headline thus becomes the delivery device for the articulation of these hopes. People were able to “write” as they walked through the mall, or sit down and cut-out and stick down to create a work. I hoped that by making the articulation of these ideas “low stakes” that more people would be involved. The publication looked like a 'zine or a scrapbook rather than a flashy publication; the time I was asking for was minimal.

MONEY



Technology played a large part in the creation and publication of the work produced for the Porirua People's Library. We used websites and social media to invite participation, stories were recorded using affordable sound recorders and photographs were taken and manipulated on computers available at the public library.

Although we literally cut and pasted paper and magazines to produce *The Made-Up Times* 'zine, I used scanners and printers to produce multiple paper copies and then distributed electronic copies of the work on Tumblr. The project uses the analogue media of the newspaper as its starting point but it was clear that people took their lead for the language of the headline from television or online news sources.

The technologies that were most successful in producing work were not new ones. Talking to people, being with them, an exercise that does not look like writing. I think the same work could have been produced in a pub over a drink, with someone asking, “What do you wish would happen?”

Technology became most dominant in the distribution of the work, and I think that, instead of breaking down old ideas of art and the artist, the way I used technology actually reinforced the elitism of the meaning of art Williams describes. I hoped that this project would represent multiple voices, that it would stand as a collaborative work that would broaden the range of literary expression, increase access to a wider authorship and be distributed to a wider readership. I think in my efforts to accomplish the increase in readership something got lost in the access to authorship. Goldsmith talks a lot about appropriation, and I think the technology I used made it very easy for me to appropriate the words of the authors involved in the project. I think this is because as a privileged person, coming into the community, I was in control of the mode of distribution.

We publicized the Tumblr through our social media accounts and I know some of the authors saw their work but I am also sure that a large group did not. I think often when I talk about the democratization of publishing through the internet I forget about the digital divide.

Although we put together paper copies for people to take and distributed these through the library I am not sure how many of the copies got to the people who were involved or whose work was included.

The thing I think limited the project the most is that it was not started from the communities. It was started by me, an outsider. I think other projects in the PPL navigated these difficulties in far better ways than mine. The ones I think that were the most successful were the ones that supplied technology for people to use as they pleased, and I think in this way I felt some hope for the possibilities of technology to increase access to authorship. Raymond Williams’s work on culture from the 1960s—on television, especially, but also on news media in *The Long Revolution* (1961)—explores, and shows frustration with, this problem too. It’s one thing to find out about what technology makes possible. But it is another to think about how a community might control and produce with that technology, out of it, in ways they control, shape and grow.

Writing in Prisons

The third project I want to talk about I think is far more successful in using technology to interrupt dominant ideas of art, originality and the figure of the artist. I work with a collective, called Write Where You Are, that aims to encourage and support creative writing as a personal artistic engagement by people who have been affected by crime, especially in cases where there may be barriers to their participation in the arts. Over the last three years, we have been facilitating writing workshops in prisons around Wellington. Over the last two years, William Brandt and I have been visiting writers at two women’s prisons supporting a six-week writing programme.

The kaupapa of Write Where You Are is largely around de-centring the “teacher.” We try to foster a situation where we are all writers writing together. We have two rules in the workshops: no one has to do anything they do not want to and nothing that is written is wrong. Creative writing is an

excellent way to empower people who have had negative experiences in educational environments, because when we say nothing you write is wrong, we really mean it.

Last year the women in one of the workshops asked if we could produce a booklet of their work. Up until now, all the women's work had been completed in handwriting, either their own or a scribe's. No technology above the pens and exercise books supplied by the prisons had been used in the workshops. What we were able to do for the booklet was take the work away and type it up and return it to them in the shape of a book, using word processing and printing technologies.

Despite the fact the writers had lead the call for a publication, I was concerned that possibly it was something we wanted more than them. There are several levels of distribution that take place in the workshops. Some work women write for themselves, some they write for their families, some they write to be distributed around their peer group in the prison, and some they want other people to read. The booklets would be distributed to staff members and guests who came to the graduation and libraries in other prisons. What I found when we worked on the booklet was that the writers were very aware of these different audiences. They were extremely good at judging which work was for which level of distribution. I believe the technology really aided this. Because of our ready access to word processing and printing we were able to quickly turn around revisions which meant the women saw their work at every step of the way. The way it very quickly looked like a booklet I believed help women make an assessment about whether the work was for the wider audience the booklet would bring.

I think the reason the booklets are such a positive experience for everyone involved is because the technology is at the right pace. The women are involved in every step because we are able to bring the technology to them. William and I are not "in control" of the mode of production or distribution. We are simply the operators of the machines that make the production and distribution possible. The women make decisions about how their works appears on the page, what the cover looks like, the order the works will appear and the name that appears on the front of the booklet as the author. I think in this particular situation technology did broaden the range of literary expression. The women were able to engage with their writing differently when it was typed and printed. And I think that because the writers had control over the appearance of the work, through our easy access to printing, their access to publication felt positive. I also think that, because of the ability to reproduce, the technology allows more people to read the work.

In conclusion, Goldsmith's idea that technology has enabled art which utilizes labour akin to manufacture appeals to me because it suggests a broadening of the term "art" to include skills outside the imaginative or creative. This return to a broader definition of art excites me because it suggests a wider range of expression, greater access to authorship and an ability to distribute work to more readers.

However, my participation in the three literary projects I have discussed in this presentation makes me a little careful to proclaim I am living in a time of technological utopia. I think there are many hangovers in place in our communities from the idea that art stands for a "special kind of truth" produced by a "special kind of person." The market is still in place and access to technology is limited in a way that means not everyone has freedom to produce and distribute using these new technologies. I also think our society still sanctions certain individuals as having the right to produce art and others as not. I think we live in a time where there are still gate-keepers who

believe imaginative and creative skills are the only appropriate skills to be utilized in the production of art and that originality is paramount.

In my experience these structures in society mean that, rather than being a change agent, technology can often act to reinforce dominant ideas of art, the artist and originality and it won't be able to reach its full potential until these structures are broken down.

¹ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society 1780–1950* (London: Penguin, 1963), 15.

² Kenneth Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 4.

³ See <http://www.peopleslibrary.org.nz/>

⁴ See <http://madetimes.tumblr.com>