

Fundamental Elephant

I left the CCR Thinkathon with a flurry of questions about questions, a line of inquiry undoubtedly prompted by my placement on the floor immediately beside Dean Kate Stimpson of NYU's Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, who immediately after Eiko's first movement laboratory wondered aloud, "This is all very interesting, but where's the *researchable question*?"

Where *is* the researchable question, indeed? I spent much of my remaining time at the Thinkathon contemplating this question. One of the answers I came up with is that a researchable question can and should be able to take many forms.

First, there is the means by which a question is articulated. A question can be fully articulated and articulate-able in verbal language, or utterly opposed to it. In Eiko's lab, she didn't launch us by announcing her research questions, she simply asked us to move. In doing so, she built the questions into our bodies: we were being asked to question through the act of moving. As it turned out, a movement question begot a movement answer: the laboratory posed and asked questions within a clearly structured movement system that happened to be outside of a certain kind of discursive language. The laboratory was not entirely nonverbal, however, because Eiko's verbal prompts informed our actions. Quite interestingly, she chose to communicate images rather than physical directions. She talked about that often-neglected area just behind our ears, and the space circling our pinky fingers. Right there, for me, is a fascinating investigation into the impact of poetic metaphor on an individual's kinesthetic reality. Someone else may have concluded something very different than I did, however, as Eiko was also deploying a very democratic research method: she didn't impose a single question upon us, but instead let us formulate both the questions and the answers. In withholding a cut-and-dry explanation and locating her questions within the participants' bodies as we engaged with her movement, she subverted the academic paradigm of the authoritative, fully verbalized research question, while still trying to probe aspects of language itself. There was undeniably a research question (actually many more than just one), posed and answered in a different way. Her study reminded me of one of the questions passed around on the card: "How do you create conditions for polyvalent outcomes?"

When a research question does enter into language, its framing can vary wildly. The card of questions gathered from the presenters captured the spectrum of possibilities: "How are dead cells in a closed compartment normally activated to die?" (Is this something science doesn't already know? Do you mean, an already dead cell can die again?) "What are you like when you are close to a question?" (...) "How does my process swallow everything?" (???!!!!)

In Mike Shelley's laboratory, the essential question, as I understood it, was, "If we set up faux crowd conditions, will it abide by our observable data on the behavior of

crowds in the world at large?” Sure enough, as we tightened the circle, the group inside began to move in the same, counterclockwise direction. Answer? “Yes.” He seemed delighted, and so were we. The question and answer held comforting certainty, for possessing something already known – i.e. the mathematician’s collected data on crowd behavior against which he was comparing this movement study. I found his labs integrated the concept of movement research in interesting and innovative ways, coming directly from science’s approach to using known data to pose a question, constructing a research methodology, and drawing a conclusion. We absolutely need this kind of research.

But we need other kinds of research as well. Contrast Mike’s study with David Gordon and Eiko’s laboratory, in which they pedaled around on rolling chairs while holding a conversation about this and that – their careers, family habits, and aesthetic preferences. I can understand why someone might wonder, “Where is the researchable question?” on viewing this laboratory, because it had messiness to it that Mike Shelley’s did not have. What it did, however, that was effective and similar to Mike’s study was to set up a structured circumstance in which behavior occurred. The structuring elements were the chairs (they never got out of them), the movement contained within the space (they pedaled continually and never left the room), and the conversation (like their pedaling, the conversation kept moving topic to topic). I had recently seen tapes of Grand Union, in which the collective that included David, Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton and others launched similar experiments in human behavior. They, like Eiko and David, developed structures both loose and rigorous in which to contain their inquiry, and willingly ventured through these structures into unknown territory of creativity. I have started to understand Grand Union as an exercise in foraging at the limits of consciousness, group and otherwise, and connected the David Gordon of the Grand Union tapes with the artist performing this laboratory, only without sharing an intensive history with his fellow performer. I wondered whether the audience reception to improvised situations has changed in the space of 40 years. I also thought about the effect of name-recognition on research, because much of the study hinged on David being David Gordon, and Eiko being Eiko of Eiko and Koma, just as the Grand Union artists were operating on the foundation of their then-reputations. Does this impede whatever is being asked? Does it become the thing that is being asked? I have no idea what David and Eiko were asking or answering. Perhaps they were simply playing, to see what came up. If artists understand anything, which of course we understand more than that, it is the research value in allowing for play. I ultimately ended up formulating my own questions on reflection.

There is something about not framing the questions in advance, in allowing for certain messiness, to an experiential research process that plows forward and “swallows everything” before whittling down to anything even remotely articulated in words, that absolutely needs to be permitted as viable research. But then, you must ask, what you do with the knowledge gained? What form does it assume?

Renato Rosaldo's talk offered one answer, in making correlations and distinctions between processes of writing poetry and processes of writing ethnography. As he described it, the single distinguishing factor between an ethnography and ethnographic poetry is not the knowledge gathered, it is the means by which that knowledge is processed. He considered how the details are selected, the parameters of "truth" vs. "accuracy," and the very nature of the details themselves. His talk began to answer for me the fundamental elephant in the room that day: what are some of the distinguishing similarities and differences between producing art and producing scholarship? Professor Renaldo's talk spoke beautifully to the problem of "art" vs. "scholarship," by giving us vividly described examples of how the same researched details get put through different processes toward different products, one a poem, the other anthropological scholarship. The question there for me was, "Why must you call it *ethnographic* poetry, and not just poetry?"

I haven't mentioned how my own movement laboratory, undertaken with my collaborator Lacina Coulibaly, fits into these experiments, and the way we answered the challenge of the day, nor have I dwelled on other very good laboratories. For myself, I mainly wished for repetition, as to be able to repeat and add layers onto our laboratory would have been generative. The Thinkathon itself was a mixed bag, as one might expect of eight hours of 15-minute slots with few restrictions, and I also haven't mentioned the more frustrating moments, or what I felt really failed at being anything other than presentational, or self-indulgent. But this openness was the point: once you place restrictions, you limit possibilities, so be very careful about the parameters you've laid. For me, the format of the day ultimately allowed for these questions about research questions to emerge:

In what manner, using what language and/or medium, and with what kind of clarity or obfuscation, intentional and otherwise is a question posed? When does a question emerge in research – at the beginning, middle, or end? What role does a question play in relation to an experiment – does it launch it? Respond to it? Clarify it after the fact? Who asks it, the investigator, the witnesses, or both? How can the different approaches to formulating questions learn from each other?

I came to understand after the Thinkathon that anything less than an openness to a variety of methods and forms of questions within those methods shuts down the potential for learning something new – for gaining and creating new knowledge, which in the end is the mission of a university. In a way, Kate Stimpson's question became my guiding researchable question, and for this I'm grateful.

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