Troubling Dissemination:
Experimentations With The Salon As Conference Event

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Bio

Linda Knight:
An arts researcher and practitioner, Linda's work focuses on materialist research methodologies, drawing practices, and philosophies and theories of early childhood education. Key research activities include:

- Deleuzian and Guattarian theories in relation to early years education and care contexts;
- Critical explorations of intergenerational collaborative drawing in early childhood education contexts;
- Engaging with affective, materialist research methods.

Linda has a sustained reputation as an international artist, exhibiting in Australia, New Zealand, USA and UK over a period of 20 years and her work is held in private collections in USA and UK, and in research collections in Australia.

Tamara Cumming:
Currently a doctoral student, Tamara's research focuses upon ways that educators negotiate discourses and subjectivities informing early childhood practice. Other research interests include:

- Deleuzian and Guattarian theories and their use in early years research
- Early childhood workforce sustainability, and
- Emerging research methodologies.

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Abstract

Salons became popular in Europe in 17th Century as sites of philosophic and literary conversation. A group of female academics interested in Deleuzian theories experimented with the salon to challenge presentation and dissemination norms that hierarchize and centralize the human. For Deleuze and Guattari (1987), assemblages are shifting and decentering, so how might assemblages of chairs, tables, bodies, lights, space, help to trouble thinking about the methodological conventions around academic disseminations? The authors discuss the salon as a critical-cultural site: Cumming presents Deleuze and play-dough, an exploration of how the playful dissemination format of the salon prompted a re-reading of a methodological vignette from earlier research. Knight, an arts-based researcher, uses video art as a creative methodology to examine conceptualizations of rhizomes and assemblages at the salon as a dissemination site. The authors conclude that the salon, as a critical, cultural site disrupts hierarchized ways of approaching and presenting research.

Keywords: salons, arts-based research, Deleuze & Guattari, critical-cultural sites

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Context

The authors form part of a collaborative research network of early childhood academics across three Australian universities: Charles Sturt University, Queensland University of Technology and Monash University. The aim of the network is to build research capacity in the field of early childhood education, to help develop thinking, theorizations and practices about, in and for early years learning and development. The great strength of the research network is that it brings together a significant body of academics (including doctoral students, early and mid-career, and senior researchers) who advocate for many different positions, views, concepts and agendas. The activities in the research network are similarly diverse, and aim to enrich, challenge and expand ideas, presumptions and interpretations of childhood growth, education and development.

Through attendance of whole-of-network meetings, interest groups with particular foci were established. One such interest group brought together those with a knowledge or curiosity about the theories of Deleuze, and Deleuze and Guattari and how these theorists might impact on thinking and research into early childhood. The group became interested in experiencing salon evenings as a feminist, critical-cultural site for dissemination and for exchange, as an alternative to the usual sites (such as conferences, or lectures) which were regarded by us as regulated and hierarchical. This paper focuses on two salon evenings that we held. These are interpreted here within critical-creative methodological framings that interrogate academic dissemination norms, which assume the human as male, as central, and as hierarchized to all other environmental components that might be present.

Deleuzian Assemblage

Deleuzian and Guattarian notions of assemblage and rhizome form the theoretical impetus for the salon project. For Deleuze and Guattari, assemblages, or clusters are constantly shifting and under transformation, "in the dimensions of a multiplicity that necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 9). Things, events, occurrences, or singularities exist in multiple, and in myriad simultaneous instances, and their rhizomatic connections are unpredictable and not layered. The rhizome, then, is flat because multiplicities "fill or occupy all of their dimensions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 9). The rhizome is also flat because it is not historical, it is permanently immanent, always becoming. History suggests depth and stasis, which upholds a concept of some thing, event, occurrence forming the root beginning of some subsequent other thing, event, occurrence. There are no starting points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree or root. In the salon events, this concept of the flat rhizome played out, in that our sitting around a table did not force another customer to open the door of the café, did not force the breeze to blow pamphlets off a table, did not cause the fabric to ruffle as the cook tied their apron around them. However, our sitting around a table did connect with those things within dimensions of multiplicities of occurrences, not as one thing formed a point of departure for other things, but as part of a multitude of happenings occurring simultaneously, in close succession. Our salon events were not at some 'beginning', nor did they act as an ending but were part of continuous rhizomatic assemblages.

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A Deleuzian and Gauttarian concept of assemblages and rhizomes dislodges the centrality of the human "into other dimensions and other registers" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 8) to include atmosphere, surface, spaces, items. So, the human subject is part of the assemblage, but does not sit at the core of the event. The human subject does not operate as a germinating seed from which all other aspects of the assemblage grows, it is part of the scene but is no more important than any other aspect of the assemblage, such as the scent of the food, the clink of glasses, the chairs, the light fixtures.

For the all-female research group, the salon presented the opportunity to pursue "a rhizomatic method…[through which] any point can form a beginning or point of connection for any other" (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxviii). The salon enabled the group to "make…random, proliferating and decentered connections" (Colebrook, 2002, p. xxvii), which meant that, rather than sharing answers about or interpretations of empirically-derived findings, the salon gave an opportunity to be together in an 'open system' that could be "untimely, indeterminate and nonrepresentational" (Masny & Cole, 2012, p. 73). We became aware of the salon as offering a series of connections between members of the group - who were at the same time, comprised themselves of many 'points' of connection with wider things.

At traditional academic conferences, the focus is often upon a centralized, hierarchized, single-voice dissemination of research findings or discoveries, and the representations and meanings researchers derive from these findings. As suggested above however, the salon, when thought about as a critical-cultural site, 'flattens out' the hierarchies of things that are there. This can provide an alternative forum by sharing knowledge through "emergent and egalitarian, local, and …communal" conversation (Finley, 2011, p. 435) that is polyvocal, collaborative, inclusive, and a part of, rather than at the center of, the wider milieu.

Salon As Conference

The term 'salon' describes a particular form of meeting whereby socially diverse but like-minded people come together in order to engage in purposeful conversation. Salons became very popular in France in 17th Century in the period up to the Revolution and subsequent Enlightenment period. Aristocratic women often hosted the salons in their drawing rooms, and those attending included male and female poets, artists, reformers, educationalists, aspiring politicians and courtiers. In bourgeois 17th Century French society, where women were subjectified as frivolous, the salon afforded women "alternative sources of status into the culture of the traditional elite" (Landes, 1984, p. 22). Ironically, their 'frivolous' status gave them a certain level of invisibility, which, via the salons, enabled women to participate and contribute to political and literary thought.

Despite the political upheaval that came on the heels of the French Revolution, which ironically dissipated many salons, similar versions of them continued in Europe and, from 20th Century onwards, into America (Sandra & Spayde, 2001). Although these earlier salons, and our own, were constituted differently and serve different purposes, what connects these salons is a desire for radical conversation, the exchange of new ideas, and a mix of participants with diverse cultures, ideologies and experiences.

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While women can now enjoy greater presence in politics, historically, the societal structures, and the engendered subjectivity of women in the 17th Century, "denied women's status as a political subject" (Landes, 1984, p. 20) in any official sense. However, in conversation in the 'unofficial' (though nevertheless political) sites of salons, women were able to contribute to the immense cultural shifts that resulted in the Revolution. This inclusion/exclusion of women holds interesting parallels with the academic context.

While women are not as invisible or trivialized within the Academy now (as was the case even 20 years ago), and, have access to the conference event and excel in these contexts, some measure of exclusion continues in universities, due to patriarchal systems of promotion that serve to keep many women in lower rank roles (Winchester, Lorenzo, Browning & Chesterman, 2006). In contemporary times of political and social hyper-conservatism, there is an ideological and methodological need therefore, for critical-cultural sites of intellectual exchange, that facilitate investigation of local and global issues through a platform that is particularly functional and beneficial to women. Salons can provide for exchange and debate, and, can act as "incubators where ideas are conceived, gestated, and hatched" (Sandra & Spayde 2001, p. ix). This grassroots system for connecting can be a highly appropriate methodological site for contemporary academics (perhaps particularly women), who might not have access to other insider-networking opportunities. Further, like the 17th Century French *Salonniéres* who were considered both frivolous and instrumental in galvanizing political revolution, contemporary female academics have dualistic subjectivities of being influential members of the Academy, while also, majoritively speaking, are fringe-dwellers. It seemed possible then, that the salon could work as a highly effective critical-cultural working site for a group of female academics to talk more freely and politically than might be possible in more sanctioned, hierarchized dissemination sites such as the boardroom, or meeting room. The salon therefore performs methodologically in two different ways: as a qualitative research tool (a rhizomatic 'model' or agglomerative structure whereby all human/non-human components are considered as having equal presence); and as a critical-cultural method for bringing together those who desire to exchange ideas and theories through polyvocal conversations. The authors participated in two salon events that were held in 2012. Aspects of what occurred at those salons were extracted and examined through arts-based research practices. Each extraction that we now go on to present, explores the salon as a methodological site, as a site to consider assemblages and the decentered human through the theories of Deleuze and Guattari.

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Play Dough, Video

Cumming: Deleuze And Play-Dough – A Reading

The salon events offered opportunities to experiment with different presentation practices, and with Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of rhizomes and assemblages, in a milieu that welcomed unpredictability. I wanted my salon presentation to follow the sudden acceleration and excitement of potentials for re-reading a research assemblage in which I had previously participated:

> *One morning, a mother, with whom I'd chatted a few times at previous play groups was sitting at the play-dough table with one of her children, so I joined her, sitting on a low, moulded plastic chair at a child-height table. We sat at right-angles to each other, which I did purposefully, drawing on a bit of background knowledge about counselling and ways to sit 'with' people. Along with the mother, I picked up some play-dough and followed along with the child as he played and narrated his playing with the play-dough. Eventually, the mother's child moved off to play elsewhere, but I felt she was comfortable there, so rather than following him, we continued to chat about how things were with her and the children. As we sat, we continued to work the play-dough, squeezing it, flattening it, pulling it to pieces, re-joining it. Not using tools, just hands. These little movements with the play-dough seemed to help the conversation flow, and to somehow fill gaps, and encourage different directions in the conversation.*
>
> *After the playgroup ended, I reflected with a colleague that there had been 'something' about the exchange with the mother that had to do with the play-dough, and we puzzled it over together. At the time, we concluded that from the perspective of early childhood pedagogy about play, it was the open-endedness of play-dough as a material that perhaps helped to facilitate the discussion.*

This inconclusive conclusion stayed open for me as a 'wondering' for some years, the 'somethingness' unresolved and unresolvable with the theoretical resources I had. My excitement about re-reading this event as part of my salon contributions was prompted by Giugni's (2011) account of "practices of becoming with" (p. 23) the material, the historical, and political, elements of the clay that she and a group of children were working together. Her account prompted me to wonder what using a rhizomatic approach to re-read the vignette above might produce.

Using the concept of 'becoming with' and the politics of materials (Giugni, 2011), I read the vignette (shared above) as an assemblage that included the play-dough, ourselves, chairs and sounds in the hall, and, and, and… I read the elements as becoming-with each other, intra-acting, rather than the other-than-human elements acting as the backdrop to the human relations. The play-dough caught my attention again, and, given its ubiquity as a material in children's play rather than the academic work of adults, this seemed an apt focus for experimentation at the salon, this time with other researchers. I introduced play-dough at the salon (*Figure 1., Figure 2.*) as a way of putting a tracing back onto the map (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) to see what new possibilities, readings, affects, thoughts might be produced.

(place fig 1 here)

Figure 1. Still from salon evening.

(place fig 2 here)

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Figure 2. Still from salon evening.

In particular, by engaging our bodies through the materiality of play-dough, my intent was to decenter myself as researcher-subject, and to open the research to possible lines of flight that did not depend upon my earlier interpretations of the original research event. This unpredictability within, and of the presentation in the salon assemblage, repeated the open-ended material politics of play-dough. The conjunction of the play-dough and the vignette and our belongings in other early childhood education events and ourselves as-and-in the assemblage of the salon, offered possibilities for experiencing life as becoming - an unpredictable "world that could be", rather than a tracing of "the world as we know it" (Masny & Cole, 2012, p. 27). My re-reading of the vignette was therefore as much what happened in the salon event, as what resulted from it.

Knight: Video

Video as arts based research can be employed to expose, if only partially, the concepts and intentions of the project, to participate in salons as sites of dissemination, and to consider this participation through Deleuzian and Guattarian theories of assemblage and rhizome. Creating arts-based research is usually difficult because it uses non-dominant visual, aural, kinaesthetic codes and languages and tries to reach an audience more used to written text; this becomes more difficult when trying to capture complex theories.

To try and "follow the rhizome… until you have produced the most abstract and tortuous of lines of *n* dimensions and broken directions" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987 p. 10) through video seems impossible, this is because Deleuze and Guattari (1980/1987) declare that "a rhizome is not amenable to any structural or generative model." (p. 13). The video art pieces attempt to capture some of this multitude, but of course they fail in completely fulfilling the task. At best they go some way to glimpse back into those events (*Figure 3.*) to show selections of actions, sounds, movements without priority or sequence. But they can never completely convey these. The video pieces replay in the same order of sequence, selected sections that are edited and therefore contained. The video art cannot avoid omitting much of the detail, and they cannot help but hierarchize certain things.

(place fig 3 here)

Figure 3. Still from salon evening

However, the video art pieces, as flawed as they are go some way to mapping the many individual components of the event. Components are not selected by importance but are there because they happened to be captured by the lens.

The components can include:

- Biological: hands, faces, chins, eating;
- Sensory: light, sound, touch, encounter, interception, voice;
- Dialogic: exclamations, laughter, questions, crowd noises, music, conversing with the wait staff, changing conversation directions, theorizations.

The video work does not capture everything but it turns attention to different details, and in so doing it decenters the human in the assemblages.

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(place fig 4 here)

Figure 4. Still from salon evening.

The video art captures some of our methodological intentions for the salon events: to experience a salon as a critical-cultural site that is different to other dissemination practices, to experience polyvocal conversations about the theories of Deleuze and Guattari, and how they relate to early childhood research. I could have gone straight to writing about the salon however video art compliments discursive and literary reporting as it captures visually some of those methodological intentions. As the video art plays it exposes things, smells, sounds which constitute the salon events, they are agglomerative and cannot be defined singly, or solely in relation to the human subject. It can convey the breaks, transitions and becoming of assemblages in ways that are conveyed differently through writing.

Through dissecting and rearranging, the video art visualizes a disruption of the precedence given to the human. The works bring in to focus the noise, objects, environment, to present "a whole micropolitics of the social field" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 8). The hierarchized human is dismantled and rearticulated, interwoven and thus broken down. Intellectual exchange is deregulated and sits within series-of assemblages. The edited sections foster connections and pick up on moments where we as participants constituted ourselves through the assemblages of objects, environments, food, wine, noises, interruptions.
The video art does not include everything but the spaces and slippages bring intensity to them, as they continue to become into new assemblages with each new viewing.

Discussion

The salon evenings sought to trouble conventions around academic disseminations that usually take place in a sterile, large room devoid of sensory distractions, and that place the speaker at the center in order to metaphorically 'raise them up' in front of a captive audience. The listener passively receives information in the conference, lecture, or seminar context.
In the critical-cultural salon, the subject is decentered as it forms only part of assemblages of sounds, lights, bodies, furniture, food, music, smells, atmospheres, temperatures. The habit of placing the human at the center of research dissemination was challenged, this brought about theorizations on historicized, classical ways for presenting and communicating. The salon events, when thought about through Deleuzian and Guattarian concepts of assemblage and rhizome therefore:

- Privilege things other than the speaker
- Facilitate further thinking on Deleuzian and Guattarian theories of the assemblage
- Tap into critical-cultural research methodologies
- Challenge communication histories and traditions, to promote more diverse ways for exchange
- Encourage arts-based practices, which foreground materiality/virtuality and thus decenters the human as the key focus.

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Our salon events dismantled the centrality of the sole speaker, and instead encouraged polyvocal discussion and exchange. Our Deleuzian salon-as-event did not sit at the center of some moment in time with offshoots coming out from it — it appeared and entered into a cluster of lines, a chaotic swarm of occurrences. As we each arrived at the salons and participated, lines of flight were intercepted and interrupted. The salons did not however act as a nucleus for any of this. They did not start anything because they were part of the plane of consistency. They were not a source or a birth but became part of a rhizomatic cluster. For each of us this experience was different. Our part, our experience in the assemblage, was (and is) particular to each of us as we became (and become) constituted through individuating forces.

The art extractions captured, if only partially "conditions of possibility for multiple lines of connection between embodied subjects and the world" (Tamboukou, 2009, p. 309). These slippages expose the energized interstitial spaces that supply moments of possibility for future research. This might connect with enquiry in existing spaces, or, drawing upon the experiences of the salon, might prompt further experimentation with polyvocal forms beyond the academy, or, forces shaping a controlled, rationalized academy.

Did the researchers participate in salon evenings because a conventional conference setting is not an assemblage? No, but traditional dissemination settings hierarchize particular individuals, actions, subjects. The traditional conference operates within classical models for intellectual debate, exchange and presentation. This format can lead to some knowledges and ways for communicating being disregarded, or considered chaotic, less 'controlled' and therefore less intellectual. The salon is immersive in that many things occur, intercept, interrupt and jostle in, through and around the conversations that take place, and by groups of people not organized or prioritized by hierarchy of knowledge, experience or gender.
So is there a 'female' way for disseminating? In the salon form, it is possible to suggest that Deleuzian and Guattarian theories of the rhizome, whereby "there is no ideal speaker-listener, any more than there is a homogenous linguistic community" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1980/1987, p. 8), flourish more so than in a classical arena. In this way, salons can continue to offer greater intellectual exchange opportunities for diverse knowledges and ways of communicating, perhaps to women in particular, who might otherwise be situated at the periphery.

Conclusion

The salons of 17th Century France took place in engendered, bourgeois society (Craveri, 2005; Sandra & Spayde, 2001), the salons discussed above occurred in a very different context. Nevertheless, they acted as equally important sites for a group of contemporary female early childhood academics interested in exploring critical-cultural methods of practice. In the French salons, women "orchestrated the dissemination of radical theories, political rumours… and could insist on the airing of new ideas about human rights" (Sandra & Spayde, 2001, p. 7). Our salons prompted us to theorize and imagine whether, as a group of female academics, we too could orchestrate radical theories on human rights in the academy today. In the same way that salons provided a platform for women in the past, for

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academics today, this format can also perform methodologically, as a site for igniting polyvocal conversation, radical thinking, change and collaboration for the many who dwell in the margins. Salons can act as a shifting conduit for performative energy and action. As a critical-cultural methodology they make apparent the presence of the many components that constitute the assemblage, and that this shifts the focus away from seeking out tidy conclusory statements about research. While this cannot be regarded as an exclusively 'female' methodology, the salon as critical-cultural, polyvocal method is in stark contrast to the sanctioned, hierarchized dissemination norms used more commonly in the academy.

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