

Art & Research Around HIV/AIDS, Queer Art and Sex

An interview with Andrew Zealley (Environmental Studies) on his dissertation, *Risky Beeswax: Artistic Responses to the Biopolitics of HIV/AIDS*, awarded the Barbara Godard Prize for the Best York University Dissertation in Canadian Studies in the summer of 2021.

— — — — —

Tell us about your dissertation.

Risky Beeswax interrogates practices of self-risk-taking in relation to HIV/AIDS and queer art and sex; and the problem that industrial mitigations of risk pose to sexually active queer men living with HIV, the kinds of sex they want, and the people they fuck in the era of AIDS industry. My dissertation explores this problem through four themes that emerged during my interviews with artists whose practices respond to AIDS and/or queer sex: 1) risking the personal; 2) (radical, ludic and risky) sexual ecologies; 3) AIDS, its intersections and risky representations; and 4) the role of risk in art and artistic practice.

My dissertation argues—through audio, video, and writing—for experiential and situated knowledges as forms of HIV management and prevention that challenge the industrial options.

What drew you to this topic?

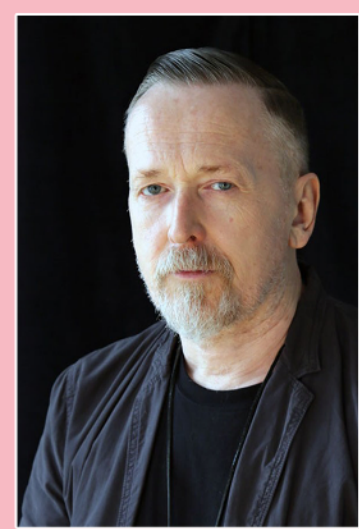
Risk and HIV and AIDS are important to me because of my personal experiences since the 1980s, as a queer-identified maker who witnessed the tempest of pre-treatment HIV in my own community.

When I tested HIV-positive in January 2001, I had already invested 15 years into art and activist responses to the AIDS crisis. I thought I knew it all. But feeling HIV on my own skin changed everything. I became silent for a number of years out of some form of misguided obligation to my partner's wishes at the time. The shame and self-stigmatization that washed over me was suffocating.

Through that death-like experience, and the legal divorce that ensued, I found myself single and uncertain about the future. Having already reinvented myself in other life chapters (queerness can be transformative), I listened to friendly encouragements and returned to school (after 32 years) to pursue my MFA and then decided to continue with doctorate studies at the Faculty of Environment and Urban Change, with Cate Sandilands as my supervisor.

What do you think others (academics and non-academics) will find interesting about your work? Share some of the main takeaways you want others to come away with.

People may be interested to learn about alternatives to the industrialization of desire,



Andrew Zealley, Ph.D., MFA
Winner of the Barbara Godard Prize for the Best York University Dissertation in Canadian Studies for 2020-21
email: safespacedynamite@gmail.com



The Robarts Centre Reflections on Research series asks our associates to go beyond the specifics of their research findings, which are often published elsewhere, and to instead reflect on the scholarship process and the subjective factors that brought them to the work.

Robarts is a 21st-century research engine for the study of Canada and "Canada in the World." Areas of expertise in Canadian studies at York, which has one of the largest concentrations of Canadian specialists globally, span multiple faculties and disciplines including arctic sciences, geography, visual and performing arts and cultural studies; political science; anthropology; and Indigenous studies.

Visit us online for more information:
<https://robarths.info.yorku.ca/>

ROBARTS
CENTRE FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

Email: robarths@yorku.ca
Website: <https://robarths.info.yorku.ca>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/RCCSYork
Twitter: www.twitter.com/RobartsCentre

pleasure and HIV. I argue for non-industrialized mitigations of risk: make pleasure, not pathology. Most queer and straight people like pleasure, though many still have difficulty achieving or finding pleasure because of sexual shame, stigmatization, and/or narrow and normative framings of sex as strictly reproductive in value. Specific to HIV, shame and stigma continue to plague people who live with the virus and are not interested in so-called monogamous/institutionalized relationships, those that are sexually active but still demonized within their own community. My approach to this topic holds value for scholars working in the fields of gender and sexuality studies, HIV and AIDS, community-based public health and queer theory as alternative knowledges and methodologies.

I want people to understand that pleasure is possible, pleasure is within grasp if we can learn to let go of—or refuse—institutionalized mandates around sex and intimate relationships. I want people to find ways to talk about their personal health goals during sexual moments, to integrate sexual health talk into sexual play. I hope that people will better understand, through my work, the insidious role that gentrification plays in our pleasure lives. Homogeneity poisons imaginations and desires.

Importantly, I want my work to be experienced in its entirety: audio, video, written. Read the ideas, then dance to them. We pick-up so much information when we engage with sound and music, when we engage with deep listening, when we dance. The video and audio interventions are moving parts that continue beyond the work of the written dissertation. I want more discussion about the role of the disco as a queer socio-sonic and -sexual space, and a site of collective energy-raising, liberation, permission, rebellion, and riot action. I want people to take my work as a platform to get angry in transformative ways.

Tell us about challenges that you as a researcher had to overcome to do this work.

There are many challenges that queer artists confront when they insert to the academy.

There is still a problem with prejudice. I was shocked when a professor at York once reduced much of the art and advocacy done by white gay men in the 1980s as a form of privilege, as "a time when you felt you were powerful." Yes, there is much work to be done in the ways we respond to and fight HIV and AIDS in relation to race and white privilege. But truth be known, in that era an HIV-positive diagnosis often meant death in six months. Most of the time, our priority was survival at a time when institutions were turning a blind eye and homophobia infused most responses. Post-secondary education is a privilege and it's up to those of us who have so-called academic credentials to put that privilege to work to lift up others.

Another challenge came from the academic emphases on methodology. Artists often form their own methods in intuitive ways and there is a learning curve that comes with talking and writing about the creative process. Artists experience and work through methods that are often difficult to translate into academic terms. The challenge is to learn to reimagine and reshape the image and structure of the academy in ways that reflect personal creativities.

The issue of HIV and positive status disclosure is almost always challenging. You feel naked in that moment regardless of how many times you have disclosed in the past. Talking about HIV status can really help in community and pedagogical settings. Disclosure can also turn into a kind of self-traumatizing force— a repetition of extreme exposure to harmful social and political elements.



The Robarts Centre Reflections on Research series asks our associates to go beyond the specifics of their research findings, which are often published elsewhere, and to instead reflect on the scholarship process and the subjective factors that brought them to the work.

Robarts is a 21st-century research engine for the study of Canada and “Canada in the World.” Areas of expertise in Canadian studies at York, which has one of the largest concentrations of Canadian specialists globally, span multiple faculties and disciplines including arctic sciences, geography, visual and performing arts and cultural studies; political science; anthropology; and Indigenous studies.

Visit us online for more information:
<https://robarths.info.yorku.ca/>

ROBARTS
CENTRE FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

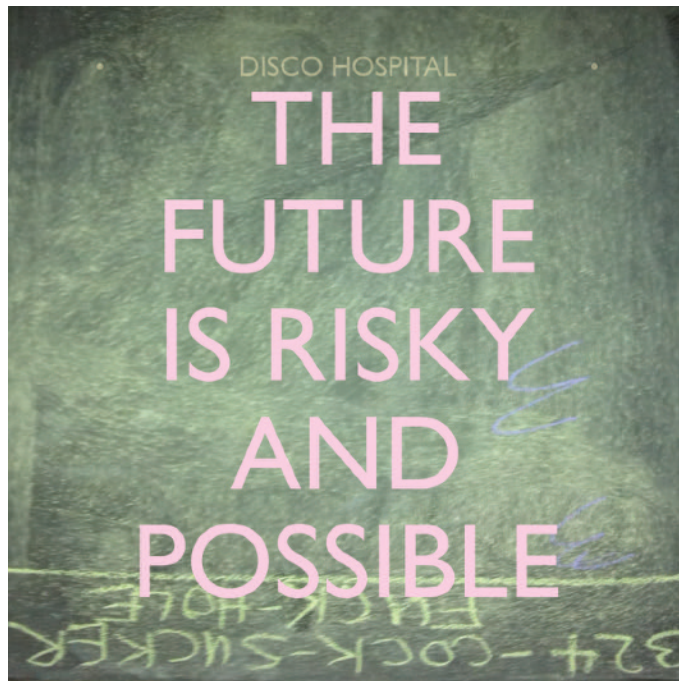
Email: robarths@yorku.ca
Website: <https://robarths.info.yorku.ca>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/RCCSYork
Twitter: www.twitter.com/RobartsCentre

I tend to put risk to work — as a maker, an educator, and a researcher. Risk: it’s what we have left.

Professionally speaking, what’s next for you?

In my professional studio practice, I am working on a number of multi-modal projects. My new vinyl LP record, “*The Magic of the Think Machine Gods*,” is releasing in November 2021. It responds to notions of institutionalized gay/queer (and racialized) male identities, behaviours, and oppressions across decades. It is a queer sonic time machine that I hope some DJs will put to work in the present-day disco—whatever that may look like in the pandemic present/future. Funding is now secured for three more/subsequent vinyl LP records that will explore the concept of being “undetected,” a prevention identity within HIV-positive community. I will expand notions of undetectable to explore ideas of silence and erasure in relation to queer desire, space, and time in pandemic futures. These LPs will release throughout 2022-2023 on my own Disco Hospital Books & Records imprint, and will feature jacket, label, and insert artwork by queer visual artists.



I’m working with Dr. Peter Hobbs (also a graduate of EUC) on a long-term project about queer therapeutics, concepts of queer fecundity, the ethics of generosity and the guiding role of plant life in the current environmental moment. Hobbs and I are both queer makers.

I just completed sound for Jess Dobkin’s *Wetrospective* — a large scale exhibition on view at the Art Gallery at York University from September 2 to 26. *Music in Eight Parts* is a two-hour sonic response to Dobkin’s 2015 performance piece, “How Many Performance Artists Does it Take to Change a Light Bulb (for Martha Wilson).” *Music in Eight Parts* occupies the Lobby/reception area of the gallery and is accompanied by a mirrored didactic panel.

I am also working with Dr. Nick Mulé (York University) on *PNPLP*, a research study into practices of methamphetamine use in relation to gay-, queer-, and trans-identified male sexual practices. “PNP” for the street-level term “party and play” that is used to let others know you enjoy methamphetamine with your sex, and “LP” for the long-play vinyl record which will be one of the study’s outputs. Mulé and I are intent on sourcing material that is often inaccessible or undervalued by institutional research. We are exploring the topic with users, harm reduction workers, sexual space management workers, and artists and activists in unbiased ways. This is not easy. Meth use carries immense stigma and shame in the general public, and in LGBTQ+ communities specifically. Where HIV and AIDS galvanized the community, meth is dividing it. This



The Robarts Centre Reflections on Research series asks our associates to go beyond the specifics of their research findings, which are often published elsewhere, and to instead reflect on the scholarship process and the subjective factors that brought them to the work.

Robarts is a 21st-century research engine for the study of Canada and "Canada in the World." Areas of expertise in Canadian studies at York, which has one of the largest concentrations of Canadian specialists globally, span multiple faculties and disciplines including arctic sciences, geography, visual and performing arts and cultural studies; political science; anthropology; and Indigenous studies.

Visit us online for more information:
<https://robarths.info.yorku.ca/>

ROBARTS
CENTRE FOR CANADIAN STUDIES

Email: robarths@yorku.ca
Website: <https://robarths.info.yorku.ca>

Facebook: www.facebook.com/RCCSYork
Twitter: www.twitter.com/RobartsCentre

divide must end if we want solutions. Planned outputs include the vinyl LP record, two academic journal articles, a public forum, and a grey-literature artist bookwork as a community and activist resource.

Lastly, I am honoured to be a participating video maker in *Viral Interventions*, a creative research study that will contribute to knowledge and scholarship regarding how artists can collaborate with communities and activists in new ways in order to respond to urgent AIDS realities. My proposed video, *Becoming Mighty Real*, will explore intergenerational and serodiscordant relationships, and the impact(s) of HIV status disclosure in that context. It will premiere at the Toronto Queer Film Festival in March 2022. *Viral Interventions* is SSHRC-funded and overseen by Dr. Sarah Flicker and filmmaker and activist John Greyson (both York University).

Share some lessons you learned about the dissertation process with those just at the beginning of their journey.

For artist-researchers who are considering doctorate studies and are reading this: Stay focused. Do the work. Be creative in that work. Be yourself, not an imagined academic body. Bring the academy to your creative process rather than molding your creative process to fit the academy. Fluxus artist and theorist Joseph Beuys made work using the statement, "Honey is flowing in all directions." Keep that in mind.

— — — — —

Related links:

Download a copy of my dissertation, *Risky Beeswax: Artistic Responses to the Biopolitics of HIV/AIDS*, here: <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/38172>

The 2LP vinyl record version of my dissertation audio intervention, *Soft Subversions* is distributed by Séance-Centre: <https://www.seance-centre.com/other-releases/house-of-intergenerational-soft-subversions>

My video intervention, *Lucid Dreaming Ludic Waking*, is distributed by V-Tape (www.vtape.org) and can be viewed here: <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/494318688>

My artist bookworks, records, multiples and editions are available at Art Metropole: <https://artmetropole.com/search?q=andrew+zealley>

Information about my creative practice as it relates to HIV and AIDS is here: <https://visualaids.org/artists/andrew-zealley>