Phenomenology & Practice, Volume 17(2022), No. 1, pp.1-8

Editorial: "And now for something completely different": An Introduction to our Special Issue

Erika Goble, NorQuest College, Canada
Email: erika.goble@norquest.ca

Long ago,
in a long ago even dreams themselves have forgotten,
the flame of a candle made wise men think
(Bachelard, 1961/ 2012, p.13)

Art accomplishes a discovery, an extraordinary rediscovery;
it places before our wondering eyes an unexplored domain of new phenomena
that have been forgotten, if not hidden or denied. These are the phenomena in fact
that open our access to what alone matter in the end: ourselves.
(Henry, 2005/2009 p. 20)

The past two and a half years of the COVID-19 global pandemic have both passed in a blink of an eye and felt like an eternity. As I sit down to write this editorial and introduction to our latest special issue on *Practices of Phenomenological and Artistic Research*, I cannot help but begin from that which has so recently reshaped our lives. COVID-19 and our subsequent responses to it have wrought major changes in how we work, how we relate to others, how we think about the world, and in what we recognize is of value. Most of us have had this virus, in mild or extreme form, with some never recovering, while the rest know one or more people who have died during this time. We have experienced endless waves of fear, caution, dread, and finally hope that we might be nearing the end, even as that end ever retreats. The pandemic has not been kind or simple for anyone, and its impacts continue with the emergence of new variants, new vaccines, and every new attempt to return to a "new normal," which seems anything but.

Throughout this time, the journal of Phenomenology & Practice has continued our work of soliciting and publishing new and interesting phenomenological texts. And throughout, nearly to the month that the World Health Organization's announcement that the pandemic was global, we have been working on this new and somewhat unusual special issue.

So, after two and a half years, I happily invoke the words of Monty Python's Flying Circus and announce "And now for something completely different." Because if the pandemic had revealed one thing to us, it is that sometimes to break out of oppressive structure that has become our lives, to give ourselves a reprieve and rediscover that which is most important to us, we need to pause, if only for a moment, and be engaged by *something completely different.*

This special issue is, exactly, that: something completely different. It is different in topic, content, and even form from what *Phenomenology & Practice* usually publishes.

While still being situated within our core concerns of phenomenology and practice, the issue is different and, in that difference, I hope it serves as a rupture or, at least, an interruption. During the pandemic, I have come to realize the value and impact of interruptions, whether small or radical, in our daily lives and habits. Such interruptions have provided solace, connection, and (at times) sanity in world where everyone became a potential source of contagion, where we locked ourselves in our homes afraid to go out, where our businesses shuttered and schooling went online, where people were not able to see most family and friends for long periods of time, where masking, sanitizing, and social distancing – physical separation and the removal of touch – became our means of survival.

During this normalized strangeness, we survived and began to thrive through shared interruptions – evening banging on pots to recognize our front-line healthcare workers, apartment balcony performances by musicians and singers, the live comedy routines given to crowds of no one – as well as the solitary escapes we gave ourselves: watching the latest Tik Tok or streaming show, baking sourdough, and ritualizing 'going out' (safely and, occasionally, unsafely) for those of us who became housebound. These momentary breaks of difference have soothed our frayed edges and kept us from existential despair in what seems a never-ending nightmare.

Everyone needs these breaks and academia is no different. Colleges and universities have taken little pause during the pandemic, even as our classes have moved online or into hybrid format and our conferences have been cancelled or made virtual. We continue to scurry and work, teach, research, and write, all while switching between modalities and managing children learning from home, increased mental health crises among our students and colleagues, and the ever-present risk of catching a highly contagious and damaging virus.

But now, I invite you to pause, to interrupt your day, if only for a short time… for the duration of exploring this special issue. I invite you to stop and open yourself to something that is beyond the norm of phenomenological research and writing. I invite you to consider, if only for a moment, *something completely different.*

Because that is what this special issue is: an invitation. An invitation to pause and consider something that is both phenomenological and that is not.

What follows is the result of two and a half years of working with three guest editors and innumerable contributors to explore the intersections of artistic practices and

phenomenological practices. This special issue originated in an invitation made to the journal in late 2019 by Alex Arteaga, Emma Cocker, and Juha Himanka. These three guest editors – two artistic researchers and one philosopher – approached the editorial team and proposed an issue that would be unique in both content and form. They asked us to host and expand upon an idea, which had been presented at the Research Pavilion #3 in the frame of the Venice Biennale 2019. The *Phenomenology & Practice* editorial team was enthusiastic about exploring this important intersection and, as the journal's editor with both a background in art and a strong interest in examining where art ends and phenomenology begins, I was the logical choice to shepherd the special issue through.

The journey of bringing this special issue to publication, however, has not been an easy one, not in the least due to its concurrence with COVID-19. There was extensive interest in the special issue – over 70 initial expressions of interest – but the topic is narrow in scope and extremely specific in focus. As was outlined in the original call for submission, the issue is *not* about how art informs phenomenology or vice versa or using art in phenomenology and vice versa, but rather the exploration of where each practice's specific methods blur into being that of the other. Moreover, our focus was on small, specific technical practices, rather than large sweeping methods employed (large methods, like the 'eidetic reduction' in phenomenology or 'figure painting' in the fine arts). These important distinctions resulted in numerous excellent and very interesting submissions being redirected to the regular issue stream or other journals (those that were redirected to *Phenomenology & Practice's* regular issue stream will appear over the next several issues of the journal).

Additionally, we struggled with the boundary of phenomenology. As a phenomenological journal, our submissions *must* be phenomenological in nature. That is non-negotiable. But how much is enough when you are exploring the edge of your discipline? The phrase "this isn't phenomenological enough" became a common refrain to contributors, who were challenged to both better articulate the specificity of their practice while simultaneously amplifying the phenomenological quality of their pieces. For many months it was pull and push, with contributors being requested to make revisions again and again, and me giving ad hoc lessons in phenomenological research and writing to artistic researchers. While writing and rewriting is common as phenomenological research activity, it is not common in the academic publishing process beyond the "here is feedback from review 1 and reviewer 2, please incorporate them into your article or respond why their requests are not appropriate." During academic publishing, we are asked to rewrite once, at most twice, and yet for this special issue, the contributors were asked to revise 5, 6, even 7 times. And yet, we had to request it. Some contributors pulled their submissions finding it easier to publish elsewhere. Others took up the challenge, some even taking it upon themselves to better learn 'classical phenomenological methods' to appease our requests.

Did it work? Perhaps. Perhaps not. But what resulted is interesting and different enough from the norm, while still retaining a phenomenological resonance.

And it is in that resonance, yet difference, that I hope you find an invitation to interrupt your everyday work and accepted understanding of phenomenology.

As with all invitations, you do not need to take it. Our invitation is open to you, but you do not need to accept it. You can click to another issue of the journal or another website at any point. Similarly, as with all invitations, it is bounded: there are boundaries to what we have allowed in this space and it will suit some and not others. While this special issue is different, it is not a free-for-all. Those who we have invited in have endeavored to meet our requirement of being sufficiently phenomenological to be published in our journal – even if their phenomenology isn't our ideal phenomenology. And, finally, as with all invitation, it has an end. The special issue is not a claim that our field must accept these forms and approaches as given to phenomenology going forward. In its designation as a 'special' issue, it is bounded as a one-time exploration for the journal. It is an interruption, a pause, and an impetus for reflection on our field and our own practices. It is something different that, in its difference, might help us better understand what we are and what we do. It is, perhaps, a complex and novel enactment of the eidetic reduction of phenomenology as a research practice itself.

I, myself, have come to many realizations about phenomenological practice from this experience. Many of them, I cognitively knew but they have been substantially reinforced as essential to phenomenological practice while working on this issue. I will present them as bluntly and directly as I have to the various contributors of this issue.

First, just because we quote a phenomenological philosopher, a phenomenological text, or Max van Manen himself, it *doesn't* mean that our work is phenomenological in nature. Phenomenology is evidenced by phenomenological insights, which themselves are evidenced by what the language used calls into being beyond the specific words used. "Citations that point, that operate as statements of "I am like this" or "I am doing that" are not phenomenological. Good phenomenological creations – whether texts, or photographs, or drawings – first invokes, then evokes, and finally reveals the nature of its subject. Phenomenological "writing creates space for the unrepresentable" (van Manen, 2014, p. 370). Phenomenology is a form of revelation of that which elides language. In phenomenological research, citations help in the revelation of the phenomenon, the process that van Manen called as *insight cultivation,* rather than being used as legitimization (which is common in many other forms of academic writing).

Second, despite the innumerable articles and books that have been published on 'how to do phenomenology,' there is no one way to do phenomenological research to create a phenomenological text (again, 'text' is used in the broadest sense of the word here). Although there are commonly employed methods, and some work better than others, no single approach is guaranteed to result in the creation of something phenomenological. What works well for one researcher, phenomenon, or form, may not be suitable for another researcher, phenomenon, or form. Part of doing phenomenology is finding the approach that will work within a given situation. It can be frustrating when what worked well in the past doesn't suffice for the current topic. And yet, in that frustration, we are reminded that phenomenology is more than a process or a set of actions (do A, then B, then C, and you get D). Phenomenology is a way of thinking and being. It is an approach to understanding and exploring our world that results in something far richer than the mere product of a mere research study or specific artistic research practice. This, perhaps, is something we all – phenomenologists, academics, and

artists alike – too frequently forget: action does not supplant being (even if action can lead into ways of being).

What frequently saves use from the processual trap is that we can recognize phenomenological texts when we see, hear, or read them. It is why, for years, I asserted *art can be phenomenological*, because I recognized certain works as phenomenological. Van Manen (2014), himself, provides a clear set of evaluation criteria for phenomenological writing, criteria that are the basis of *Phenomenology & Practice*'s reviewer guidelines. These guidelines were not changed for this special issue.

So, if we know a variety of ways to do phenomenological research and that we must discover the approach that suits the phenomenon under study, and we know what makes a good phenomenological text, why can doing phenomenology be so difficult? And why, once you find a way in, does it suddenly become so easy (at least for a short period of time)? In working on this special issue, I have come to suspect that it is in what exists between our practices and what we create. It is the thing that we teachers and phenomenological mentors insufficiently articulate to those we work with. It is the thing that, now looking back on when I was first learning how to do phenomenology, I saw Max repeatedly trying to instill and induce in the class. It is the thing that, now having complete several phenomenological studies, I've learned how to self-induce (my most common approach being to read one of Bachelard's reveries before beginning to write).

It would be simplistic to call it a leap – or in the case of the contributors that I worked with, the soft (and occasional hard) push I gave them when they were revising their submissions. It is what is overcome between one's procedures and one's product; what moves one's phenomenological practice into phenomenological meaning. And it is what van Manen points to in the very section of the last chapter of *Phenomenology of Practice* (2014) called "The Research is the Writing."

My fourth insight is that what can be so difficult about *doing* phenomenology is that one needs to *become* phenomenological in order to actually *do* phenomenology. This may seem self evident, but it is not a question of the techniques we employ. Rather, it is a matter of being, and being different from our other ways of being in the world: whether that is being a researcher, an instructor, or an artist. It is a giving up of one's given mode of thinking about and relating to the world to take on a phenomenological one. We must become phenomenologists, think like one, and engage one's world like one. And this is a mindset that can be difficult to maintain over long periods of time, especially when we are interrupted by work emails, or children calling for us, or the phone ringing. Even when we do manage to maintain it for extended periods of time, for many, it can be an unnerving and very uncomfortable experience because of its unfamiliarity and fundamental difference to how we normally approach our world. It is, once again, an interruption in our everyday life: an interruption that we may come to engage in regularly (for those of us who enjoy the experience and want to claim the term 'phenomenological researcher') or infrequently (for those who try it and dislike the experience), or even accidentally. But to create phenomenological texts, it is rarely sufficient to engage in phenomenological practices. One must be existentially engaged phenomenologically.

Many of us were first introduced to phenomenology through Merleau-Ponty's preface to *Phenomenology of Perception* (1962, 2006). It is the text that, for many, first showed us how to bridge phenomenological philosophy and phenomenological practice, and it is one to which many of us return. It is perhaps not surprising then that, as much as phenomenology is theorized, to do phenomenology is as much a matter of sense perception and intuition as it is rigorous reflection. I have always resonated with van Manen's (2005) analogy of *Writing in the Dark* and Merleau-Ponty's (1962, 2006) likening Husserl's purpose to that of the fisherman's net pulling up the depths of the ocean. Each recognizes the act of needing to step into an unknown, unseeable environment, to *trust* that something is already there to find, and then discovering through our work that which is unexpected but was always already there.

Finally, working on this special issue has been a clear reminder that phenomenology is never complete. At a certain point, we say 'good enough', even in its messiness, for now. As Merleau-Ponty (1962, 2006) writes:

> The unfinished nature of phenomenology and the inchoative atmosphere which has surrounded it are not to be taken as a sign of failure, they are inevitable because phenomenology's task was to reveal the mystery of the world and of reason. (xiii-xxiv)

I take heart that it is well recognized by one of our foundational philosophers that completion and perfection are impossible in phenomenology, even if my non-phenomenological academic training resists.

In addition to the insight this process gave me into phenomenology, there were two new learnings about academia more generally. Some may find these to be novel, other may consider them well known. I believe, however, that they bear being stated because they are problematic for contemporary academia at large.

The first realization is that authors and creators – whether artists, artistic researchers, or phenomenologists – are highly territorial of their work, even when they are exploring the fringes and overlaps into other fields, where encroachment can either be approached collaboratively or as competition.

Second and related to the first, is that research (again, whether artistic or phenomenological) is too often a solitary or small group exercise, while academic publishing, no matter the form, is a communal experience that contributors often hate. Hate is a strong word, but it fits what we encounter. I speak here from both the perspective of a published author and journal editor. As authors, we hate that our work, over which we had so much control in its creation, can only reach others by passing through a myriad of other people's revisions. We hate getting the reviewers' feedback, then the editors', and final requests to ensure compliance with journal's formatting guidelines. We hate the required changes, often seeing little value in the requests, but we do them all the same just to get published, just to reach the broader community. And while we may readily accept that phenomenological writing is writing and rewriting, we dislike when the rewriting is driven by the demands of others, not our own assessment of our work.

As an editor and educator, however, I see the converse, the value of requiring revisions, reworkings, rewritings, and the occasional rejection. Too often the publishing process is approached as a two-party relationship when, in fact, we are part of a larger academic community. As you have likely guessed, the revision process for this issue was not always easy. But is it not because of the topic of the issue, who the guest editors were, or the quality of the submissions. It is because of the nature of academia, itself. We are isolated egos *until* we have to publish, then are forced into community. As someone who, throughout the entirety of my career has felt part of the phenomenological community and can attest to the value of being a member, I still see myself in this harsh observation. And I wonder if, perhaps, we need to change, not the publishing process, but how we approach research as a whole. We base our work on that of others, so why do we largely work solitarily until publication or presentation? Might the publishing process be easier if we had been engaged our community more fully earlier?

But back to the special issue. I will conclude this introduction by acknowledging that some of our regular readers may not care for this issue and may even challenge it as being not phenomenology or not phenomenological enough. As noted above, that was an ever-present challenge we faced in preparing this issue: when was a piece phenomenological enough to be published within this journal? I *think* we achieved that benchmark, but some may disagree. And it is in that disagreement that interesting conversations will emerge. Because this special issue is about exploring the edges of our common practice. What is that line between artistic and phenomenological research practices? When does one become the other? Can they simultaneously co-exist when art and phenomenology serve fundamentally different purposes?

I also acknowledge that there are severe limitations to this issue. All of the pieces explore where artistic research practices become phenomenological in nature. We have no contributions that explore the inverse: where phenomenological practice comes an artistic research practice. This lopsidedness emerged in the selection process. It could be attributed as a limitation of the editorial team. Or, it could reveal something more profound about the phenomenological enterprise. Phenomenologists did submit contributions for consideration, but those contributions were too broad in their definition of practice or did not concern specific phenomenological practices at all. As I have already noted, many were excellent and will appear in future issues of *Phenomenology & Practice*, but they did not 'fit' this special issue. They lacked the specificity required, a specificity that their artistic researcher counterparts were readily able to provide. And it is in this difference that I ponder the cause. In recent decades, artistic researchers have had to validate their existence as a field through close association with other subject areas, areas like phenomenology. Phenomenology, in turn, has not had to provide such a justification for nearly a century. We are safely protected by the dual umbrellas of continental philosophy and qualitative research. We are established, even as we may in-fight about what is 'the right way' to do phenomenology and who stays true to phenomenology's purpose. This has given us a security, a security that allows for extensive inward examination, but which does not force us to explore in detail our borders and edges, borders and edges that are messy and contradictory and, above all, interesting. Borders that, ultimately, come to define who we are and what we do, even if

they are unclear and slippery, and we may pass beyond them without realizing we have left our home territory.

I would like to say that, having ushered this special issue through, I now have a better understanding of the intersections of art, artistic research, and phenomenology. It is a topic dear to my heart and my phenomenological practice. But I cannot make that claim. While I have been fascinated by the work being presented here, I also recognize that it offers no theoretical or philosophical justification for artistic research as phenomenology or phenomenology as artistic research, nor was it meant to. Rather, these are demonstrations; works that rub and worry our ways of knowing; works that press, sometimes gently, sometimes harshly; works that that interrupt my understanding and, in the end, have me leave with a better sense of what *I do* as a phenomenologist.

And so, I invite you to take a bit of time to explore this issue. To both take up your phenomenological mantle and momentarily suspend your expectations of what a phenomenological text should be. I invite you to spend time with each submission and, where called upon, move between our journal site and the Research Catalogue platform. The guest editors and I have provided as much instruction as possible to guide your exploration back and forth between the two platforms. Although uncommon for *Phenomenology & Practice*, employing two different platforms was our way of ensuring the contributors' requested formats could be respected as much as possible. And so, enjoy the next little while as an interruption, and I look forward to our continued conversations.

References

Bachelard, G. (1961/2012). *The Flame of the Candle* (J. Caldwell, trans.). Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications.

Henry, M. (2005/2009). *Seeing the Invisible: On Kandinsky* (S. Davidson, trans.). New York: Continuum.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1962,2006). *Phenomenology of Perception* (C. Smith, trans). London & New York: Routledge.

van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of Practice: Meaning-Giving Methods in Phenomenological Research and Writing.* London, ON: The Althouse Press.

van Manen, M. (2005). *Writing in the Dark.* London, ON: The Althouse Press.