

VacZineNations!, a Critical Dialogue

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and Lisa Webb

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Article abstract

VacZineNations! is a collaborative artwork led by Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtich Tonoyan, produced by artists, students, and designers in the UK, Canada, China, and Armenia, and exhibited as part of at Galleri KiT in Trondheim, Norway, and UNAIDS in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2017. This critical dialogue text gives insight into the necessarily messy approach used to develop a project with over one hundred participants, working from multiple disciplinary and geographic perspectives. This text is accompanied by a second essay that positions the artwork within the context of practice-led research (see Knowles, "VacZineNations! as Practice-Led Research" in this volume).





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Kaisu Koski, *Injection Simulator* (2015)

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VACZINE NATIONS!, A CRITICAL DIALOGUE

RACHELLE VIADER KNOWLES, MKRTICH TONOYAN, PATRICK MAHON,
JOHN HAMMERSLEY, LISA WEBB

VacZineNations! is a collaborative artwork led by Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtich Tonoyan, produced by artists, students, and designers in the UK, Canada, China, and Armenia, and exhibited as part of <Immune Nations> at Galleri KiT in Trondheim, Norway, and UNAIDS in Geneva, Switzerland, in 2017. This critical dialogue text gives insight into the necessarily messy approach used to develop a project with over one hundred participants, working from multiple disciplinary and geographic perspectives. This text is accompanied by a second essay that positions the artwork within the context of practice-led research (see Knowles, "VacZineNations! as Practice-Led Research" in this volume).

VacZineNations! est une œuvre d'art collaborative dirigée par Rachelle Viader Knowles et Mkrtich Tonoyan, produite par des artistes, des étudiants, et des designers au Royaume-Uni, au Canada, en Chine et en Arménie, et exposée dans le cadre de <Immune Nations> au Galleri KiT à Trondheim, en Norvège, et à l'ONUSIDA à Genève, Suisse, en 2017. Ce texte de dialogue critique donne un aperçu de l'approche nécessairement désordonnée utilisée pour développer un projet avec plus d'une centaine de participants, travaillant à partir de multiples perspectives disciplinaires et géographiques. Ce texte est accompagné d'un deuxième essai qui place l'œuvre d'art dans le contexte de la recherche dirigée par la pratique (voir Knowles, «VacZineNations! As Practice-Led Research» dans ce volume).



Figure 1: VacZineNations! poster installation at Galleri KiT, Trondheim, Norway, 2017.

Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

OVERVIEW AND DESCRIPTION

How does the social crux of the vaccination issue—public good versus individual choice—vary between different countries and communities? How can we position and communicate local experience in global contexts? These questions were the starting point for a project with many participants, *VacZineNations!*, devised by Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtich Tonoyan as an interdisciplinary platform bringing students and artists together. Drawing submissions from Canada, the UK, China, and Armenia in printmaking, visual arts, graphic design, journalism, and creative writing, the project mirrored the interdisciplinary approach of *<Immune Nations>* as a whole, and asked participants to consider how they might employ strategies of collaboration and nexus thinking in relation to the topic of vaccinations.

The three works that formed *VacZineNations!* can loosely be described as *Big Zine*, *small zine*, and *Window Graphics*. In scope, *VacZineNations!* was “messy,” with these three categories of works devised by the project initiators, Knowles and Tonoyan, to engage a broad range of ideas, creative approaches, and geographic and disciplinary perspectives. The project was designed to evolve and change in response to the contexts of display and the input of participants. *VacZineNations!* was, to varied degrees, graphic design, science journalism, health policy, education, and contemporary art, undertaken through

dialogue-based methods that embraced multilingualism, cultural exchange, collaboration, multiple authorship, teaching and learning.

One hundred and one people contributed to this project. Of this group, the majority were students from Coventry University in the UK, Central South University (CSU) in Changsha, China, as well as Western University and the University of Alberta in Canada, with additional contributions from Armenia. But while this list locates countries of residence, the list of nationalities was far greater, as the Coventry University group alone included a high proportion of international students from countries as diverse as India, Bulgaria, Thailand, and Nigeria.

Big Zine began as a series of graphic posters and print works, shown as a wall installation at Galleri KiT in Trondheim and in its final finished form as an oversized zine publication for the exhibition at UNAIDS in Geneva. The contributing works were drawn from an assignment that posed the same challenge to students as the participants of the broader <Immune Nations> project—namely, to consider how creative means could challenge the problem of vaccine hesitancy.





Figures 2 and 3: VacZineNations!, the Big Zine at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photos by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Students worked together on research for the project through online tools, then through two face-to-face workshops in Coventry and Changsha as part of an exchange program. The works from the Coventry–Changsha exchange program were also collated into a *small zine*. The *small zine* project was a series of limited edition handmade publications, distributed for free at each of the exhibition venues. The contributing works were primarily developed through an assignment set to master’s-level graphic design students at Coventry University, with input from undergraduate students on the Coventry University journalism course. The zines made by students were accompanied by two other zines made by artists John Hammersley (UK) and Alex Gubbins (USA/Armenia).



Figures 4 and 5: *VacZineNations!*, the small zines at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photos by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

As a site-specific response to the architecture of the UNAIDS building in Geneva, a further assignment was set to graphic design students in Coventry and the exchange students from Central South to design images that could be produced in vinyl as *Window Graphics*. All of the submissions were included in the Coventry–Central South *small zine*, a selection was displayed in poster form in Trondheim, and works by Lu Song, Cui Yixuan, Ziyang Peng, and Claudia Poppy were produced as window graphics for the exhibition in Geneva.



VacZineNations!, the *Window Graphics* (Figures 6 and 7: left: Lu Song / right: Ziyang Peng and Cui Yixuan) at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photos by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

With such a wide-ranging set of collaborations, it was decided that three separate face-to-face dialogues would be undertaken. The first dialogue was in Geneva, during the installation of the second *<Im-mune Nations>* exhibition at UNAIDS in May 2017, between the pro-

ject initiators Knowles and Tonoyan and Patrick Mahon, one of the other artists involved in <*Immune Nations*>, who also brought his students from Western University in Canada into the project; the second was in August 2017 between Knowles and Lisa Webb, course director for the MA Graphic Design course at Coventry University; and the third was in August 2017, between Knowles and John Hammersley, a lecturer in graphic design at Coventry University, and one of the artist participants who contributed a small zine to the project.

The texts that follow weave these three dialogues into one.

THE DIALOGUES

Mkrtych Tonoyan: Were you skeptical about the <*Immune Nations*> project at the start?

Rachelle Viader Knowles: Yes, I was skeptical about how a group of science/immunology people, public health people, [and] art people would find a pathway together towards something interesting in a very short time frame—how this was all going to turn into coherent exhibition projects. It all seemed a bit daunting.

Tonoyan: So you had the same concerns I had.

Knowles: Yes! But thinking back, the concerns shifted when we started thinking about mechanisms for getting students involved. Patrick, you brought your group of printmaking students from Western University into the *VacZineNations!* project. Without putting words in their mouths, what sorts of things did your visual arts students get out of this, in terms of the broader resonance and thematics of the project? How much filtered through?

Patrick Mahon: I would say quite a lot. They were interested—more interested than I expected them to be—in the subject of vaccines, and there was a group of Chinese students who had strong narratives around how vaccines are thought about and used in China. Also, some of the Canadian-born students talked about it generationally, that they experienced their parents as more vaccine skeptical than they are. There was a considerable amount of interesting discussion and I was

quite surprised at how intently my students engaged with the subject itself. I would say that the most transformative dimension of the project was that they ended up feeling that their work as artists could engage deeply in real-world subjects, and be interesting not only to them but also to other people. It was a huge learning moment for them. In art schools in Canada, there's still a pretty strong bent towards art as an autonomous activity—art for the art world and all that sort of thing—so I was nervous that they were going to roll their eyes and only engage with this in so far as I had assigned it. But it felt like it didn't take that long before they were actually taking ownership of their involvement in the project.

Knowles: It's interesting that your concerns about the students being skeptical of taking part in such an interdisciplinary “issues-based” project perhaps matched ours as the artists involved in *<Immune Nations>*. I remember being anxious at the start of this project about my ability to “learn immunology.”

Mahon: I think that we quickly realized, as artists, what it is that we do: we try and communicate in ways that are creative and expansive, we try and draw attention to things that maybe the average person in their daily life won't take notice of, and we have certain methodologies and expertise that we use to do this. I think that's the challenge: not to get so anxious about what we don't know that then we are not trusting our own instincts as artists.

Knowles: The interdisciplinary “tension” you are getting at here is certainly something we wanted to build into the students' experience of the *VacZineNations!* project. We invited our journalism course at Coventry University to get involved with the graphic design students, but in the end only four journalism students chose to participate. It was extremely difficult to entice collaboration between the courses (graphic design and journalism), so in the end, it fell rather flat.

Tonoyan: I also tried to bring journalism students into the project with the idea that they could gather data and media analysis on the topic of vaccination from the Caucasus region (Armenia); that would have been very interesting to share with the students in Canada and the UK. But I also could not make it happen. From my point of view, our cur-

riculum is too rigid to accommodate experimental projects like this one and students didn't want to do this work "extra to load."

Mahon: I sense a theme! I also had problems getting journalism students involved at Western University. It is really apparent that if a project is not for marks, or they don't know how they are credited for this work, students are reticent. My visual arts students' work was embedded into the course/module, so that helped. But if there is not a culture of seeing beyond the defined borders of your field in terms of outputs, a project like this may just seem weird and remote. Those who participated really enjoyed it though—particularly when we did the live Skype tour for them from the exhibition at Galleri KiT in Norway and they saw their works on the wall. It was a perk that their work was having a life in the world. It wasn't just an experimental collaborative thing, but it was going to have results that they could be proud of. That in itself was a big deal.

Knowles: Lisa, unlike the visual arts students that Patrick works with, your MA Graphic Design students at Coventry University are perhaps more used to responding to "issues-based projects" and what gets called a "live brief" in design subjects. Can I ask about your motivations for including your MA Graphic Design students in *VacZineNations!*?

Lisa Webb: Our students at Coventry University are a diverse international group and I could see very quickly that the topic of vaccines, as seen from international perspectives, would be a very interesting live brief for this group of students to work through. I was also drawn to the zine as a hands-on format few of them had encountered. So on both counts it presented a concise "design thinking" project opportunity. As a teaching team, we thought this would both broaden and enrich the students' experience in terms of collaboratively working in groups and across cultural and disciplinary borders. We started a Facebook group as the locus for sharing information and articles gathered from multiple sources.

Knowles: You also went on to bring your undergraduate students into the project in a much more ambitious way. Can you describe how the project opened up to include a lot more people?

Webb: Once we had the MA group working on this, we saw the opportunity to extend participation to a group of undergrads involved with an international exchange program we run each year with Central South University in Changsha, China. That group worked in the format of posters, which we showed first on the Coventry University campus, then at the exhibition in Trondheim, and then the works came together in their own discrete *small zine* for Geneva. Some of the posters were also selected for the *Big Zine* project. We ran the exchange with CSU as a COIL (collaborative online international learning) project, which meant that students worked together online. But in this project, there was also the face-to-face exchange aspect of the Chinese students coming to Coventry and vice versa. This again allowed the topic to be discussed broadly and for research materials to be shared through online systems—at least that was the plan. The Coventry undergrad students joined the Facebook group, but of course for the students in China that wasn't possible. So to overcome this (as we have done in previous years), we developed an online blog where our students transferred materials from the Facebook group onto Tumblr. But when we went to China as part of the exchange trip, we discovered that Tumblr too has fallen out of favour in China. So it became difficult to sustain a good level of communication through those systems, and the face-to-face discussion in the classroom became central. Some of that was realized with more mature solutions, and the students were encouraged in the classroom sessions to consider how their design work “speaks” in international contexts, which really enabled the students to “own” their intercultural competencies by the end of the exchange program. They were forced to ask themselves if their designs “work” in different contexts, leading to a much greater awareness of the designers’ responsibilities, the designers’ voice, and the cultural influence that design can have.

Knowles: When I came back from Geneva, we did a follow-up session with the Coventry MA Graphic Design group. We looked at images of the exhibition and they were able to see the context in which their work met an audience—not a context many of them were used to working in. We also asked them to respond in writing to six questions:

1. What did you learn/get from the project that you expected to learn?
2. What did you learn/get from the project that you didn't expect to learn?
3. What would you do differently if you were to do a similar project in future?
4. What did you find most challenging about the project?
5. Is there anything that you would wish to learn more about as a result of this project? (skills/understanding), and
6. What, if anything, did you learn about vaccines?

Webb: Yes! That was very interesting. Mainly, the student responses centred around four key things: the details they learned about the specific scientific or social themes they focused on in their research; the practical skills they developed in making the zines; the challenge most of them found in collaborative working in groups; and reflection on how they might have approached the project differently. Surprisingly, many of these students had never had to collaborate before, so learning the art of negotiating a solution to a design problem as a group was a difficult thing for many of them. One student responded that “the project further proved to me how passionate I can get about social issues and increased my interest in social impact design.” That was really exciting to hear, and a couple of other students also demonstrated their growing awareness of the impact their design work could have.

Knowles: Do you have the impression that the students did indeed learn more about vaccination and vaccination policy than they had expected to?

Webb: Yes. This was evidenced in interesting ways in a couple of the student responses, such as, “I hadn’t expected to learn as much as I did about HPV and just how many people it affects,” and most poignantly by a student from Nigeria, “some of my assumptions about the polio virus were proved incorrect. I had assumed that the polio virus was

completely eradicated from Nigeria, but research showed that I was wrong.” The cross-cultural makeup of the group meant that we were really able to look at the topic from multiple cultural perspectives and students started to think about vaccination from the position of their own bodies. One student responded by saying that she “always knew vaccines were important because back in India we take vaccines pretty seriously and it’s a must that we take all the vaccines that are available.” Overall however, the challenge was to encourage the students to really dig into the subject matter, and some students certainly achieved that better than others. One student noted that “vaccine knowledge is specialized and hard to understand” and the responses from a number of students revealed useful reflection on the vital role design plays in communicating health advice and policy to a non-specialist audience.

Knowles: It was interesting for me that for most of these students it was the first time they had participated in an exhibition. It had not occurred to me until we had the post-show chat that for graphic design students this was a new experience that also crossed a disciplinary boundary. I described to them some of the moments I witnessed in Geneva of people interacting with their works, particularly seeing scientists getting so excited to see work made by an art and design student on the subject they have spent their careers working on.

Webb: I was really struck that people were excited by the exhibition. In terms of the subject of combining art with advocacy for important topics, I think that was perhaps a really important bit of feedback for me as an educator, and would encourage me to participate in such a project again.

Knowles: One of the aspects of the project I have found very interesting was working with students between the boundaries of “art” and “design” and the conventions that come with each disciplinary realm. John, you intersected with *VacZineNations!* as both a design tutor at Coventry University and as a participating artist, contributing a small zine artwork that moves beyond those two categories into what you have called a research aesthetic. Can you tell me about your involvement in *VacZineNations!*, what you made and how your contribution developed as a piece of artistic research?

John Hammersley: I got involved partly because I teach part-time on the MA Graphic Design course at Coventry University, but also because I am interested as an artist-researcher in how art-as-research can establish what Simon Pope has described to me as contemporary art's research aesthetic (personal communication, May 2018). As I understand his notion, how contemporary art communicates or performs its knowledge is increasingly informed by research and everyday practices beyond the traditional discipline concerns of art and design, but also contemporary art weaves together these different modes of knowledge in interesting or unexpected ways. The rich mix of different participants in this project seemed like an excellent opportunity to learn for myself and to support the students. On a straightforward subject-matter level, I was able to address my rather embarrassing ignorance about vaccinations, and at the level of artistic output I was able to see how such a complex layering of different modes of knowledge might be presented as a project and exhibition. On a simpler practical level, however, I saw a chance to return to a mode of making works that I had steered away from somewhat in my practice-led research but which seemed to be increasingly something of a pre-occupation: written and designed dialogues that function as works of art-as-education. This project seemed like an opportunity to work on a brief alongside the students as part of my design teaching practice in a way that demonstrates the artist-lecturer as co-learner. I learned some things from the students about their perceptions of vaccinations, but, also, I learned from my collaboration with a doctor who lives in my town, Dr. Clare Littlejohn.

The work I made is a *small zine* called *A dialogue on vaccination*. I started by considering what the “career” or life story of such an object—a vaccine—might be, and wrote out a protocol for a semi-structured interview. I was thinking of doing it as a performance interview, although I know all interviews are a performance of sorts. But a friend of mine put me in touch with Dr. Littlejohn, who had had some experience working with vaccine programs but weirdly also had an interest in something I had never heard about before called “literature in medicine”—an example would be W.H. Auden’s poem *Letter to a Wound*. So Dr. Littlejohn agreed to take part. I explained to her I was going to

ask a series of questions, and would she be willing to try and answer as if she were a syringe intended for vaccines? The conversation revealed lots to me about the production, the journey or distribution, [and] the lifespan (as in the single-use: its life's purpose is for one use only in the case of vaccine use) of vaccines.

Knowles: Did anything unexpected arise from your interview with the doctor?

Hammersley: It made me realize how little thought I had actually given to the importance of vaccinations for public health, basically how little I knew about vaccination. I was surprised to learn how in the UK parents maybe take it for granted or perhaps even have an odd skeptical or fearful relationship to vaccinations, but clearly that's not the case everywhere in the world where in many places there seems to be a much more positive relationship. I was surprised that my dialogue with the doctor touched upon themes that led me to follow up and learn about some more uncomfortable UK-based issues such as the measles, mumps, rubella (MMR) scandal and the damage that one discredited piece of fake research did to the public health of the UK for a while. The extent of that damage was a shock to me. Even more uncomfortably, the other thing I was surprised to read about was the continuing skepticism or even hostility towards immunization programs overseas in countries which have an Islamist dimension. And more surprising was the discovery that some doctors in the UK still question the science behind vaccinations.

Knowles: Final question, John, was there any impact on your teaching?

Hammersley: Working on this project, I became aware just how many news articles about vaccinations were appearing in the national press quite by chance during its time span. Feeding them back into the Facebook group with the students helped me to realize the value of social media as a real-time "live" group learning tool. I think students of all creative disciplines now have to be networked and global in how they approach projects, and the multiple dimensions, discursive platforms, or spaces of *VacZineNations!* was a great example for all who were involved.

Knowles: Agreed. *VacZineNations!* crossed assumed hierarchies between student and professional work, education and art, and multiple disciplinary lines between art, design, journalism, and health policy. Research-based dialogical art projects such as this become a means of teaching art and design students the critical rewards of participating in global conversations that address the challenges that affect us all. We set out to develop an alternative educational model *and* a critical methodology for artists wishing to address pressing political and social challenges in interdisciplinary and collaborative ways. This happened for students involved with the project, but also at the exhibition sites. I witnessed audience members attending the GLOBVAC conference and the World Health Assembly engage with the *VacZineNations!* projects with enthusiasm, excitement, and curiosity, working together to turn the pages of the *Big Zine*, examining the *small zines*, and encountering the *Window Graphics* in surprise. This audience did not seem to regard these works as specifically aesthetic artistic objects for contemplation, but rather as creative catalysts for action and dialogue, provoked by the interdisciplinary engagement with their own areas of highly specialized expertise. As Lisa indicates, conveying this engaged audience reaction back to the MA Graphic Design students in Coventry as part of a discussion on the exhibition was a critical moment in the students' understanding of the impact their design work can have in broader discourse. Patrick makes a similar point in relation to his Skype tour of the Trondheim exhibition for his visual art students at Western. He points out that the occasion when students saw their work at the exhibition was a key transformative moment of feedback. It seems to me that the outcomes (and the artwork) of *VacZineNations!* are not only the physical objects and interventions in the exhibition spaces: perhaps more significantly, they are the dialogues and transformational exchanges that occurred afterwards, as a result of the project's multilayered conversations.



Figure 8: *VacZineNations!*, the Window Graphics (Bunny by Claudia Poppy) at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.



Figures 9 and 10: Yao Bu, *Vaccine Revolution*, screenprint, 2017 (left), and Shelby Hayward, *Untitled*, screenprint, 2017 (right). Images courtesy of the artists.

IMAGE NOTES

Figure 1: *VacZineNations!* poster installation at Galleri KiT, Trondheim, Norway, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 2: *VacZineNations!*, the *Big Zine* at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 3: *VacZineNations!*, the *Big Zine* at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 4: *VacZineNations!*, the *small zines* at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 5: *VacZineNations!*, the *small zines* at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 6: *VacZineNations!*, the *Window Graphics* (by Lu Song) at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 7: *VacZineNations!*, the *Window Graphics* (by Ziyang Peng and Cui Yixuan) at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 8: *VacZineNations!*, the *Window Graphics* (Bunny by Claudia Poppy) at UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Rachelle Viader Knowles.

Figure 9: Yao Bu, *Vaccine Revolution*, screenprint, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 10: Shelby Hayward, *Untitled*, screenprint, 2017. Image courtesy of the artist.

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Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtych Tonoyan, *VacZineNations!*, Galleri KiT, Trondheim, 2017. Small zines installation. Photo by Natalie Loveless.



Installation of the large zine with artists Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrtych Tonoyan, *VacZineNations!*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Photo by Roman Levchenko.



Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrkich Tonoyan, *VacZineNations!*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Large zine installation and window elements. Photo by Mkrkich Tonoyan.



Rachelle Viader Knowles and Mkrkich Tonoyan, *VacZineNations!*, UNAIDS, Geneva, 2017. Large zine installation and window elements. Still image from video by Julien Duret.
