

# **Embracing the Arational Through Art, Ritual and the Body**

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## EMBRACING THE ARATIONAL THROUGH ART, RITUAL AND THE BODY



Bickel, Barbara (2004). *Who will read this body?* Gallery Performance Ritual. Vancouver: AMS Gallery, The University of British Columbia. Photo credit Donald Reiken.

Note:

*Who will read this body?* Gallery Performance Ritual video is played without sound during the presentation of this essay.

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I begin this paper by defining the *rational* and the *irrational* along with the *arational* as understood by Western philosophy (Angeles, 1992).

**rational** 1. containing, or possessing REASON or characterized by reason...

5. adhering to qualities of thoughts such as consistency, coherence, simplicity, abstractness, completeness, order, or logical structure. (p. 252)

**irrational** 1. not in accordance with, or contrary to, reason; absurd; foolish; nonsensical. 2. not endowed with reason (rational powers, rational faculty).

The arational is recognized as the nonrational in a philosophical definition of mysticism but does not merit its own definition within the *HarperCollins Dictionary of Philosophy*. The **arational** (drawing from philosopher Jean Gebser and mystical traditions) is a form of knowing that includes the body, the emotions, the senses, intuition, imagination, creation making, the mystical, spiritual and the relational, alongside the rational. The arational can be found in the practices of art, meditation, psychoanalysis, the body, the senses, etc.

## INTRODUCTION

This paper is a beginning articulation of the arational as a valid site of learning and knowing as uncovered through my own practice as an artist-pedagogue. My work is situated within visual and performance art but when I speak of art, I include all forms of art. I draw upon my autoethnographic (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) and a/r/tographic (Springgay, Irwin & Wilson, 2004) thesis (Bickel, 2004) thesis and accompanying art entitled *From Artist to A/r/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body*. In the thesis, learning from arational places of knowing is revealed through

art making, personal narrative, poetry, ritual and the body. This paper encourages us to look at the question: *How can education embrace the space of the arational as a site of learning?*

To explore the concept of the arational in this paper, I draw from Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser's (1905-1973) theory of the arational. Within law and conflict resolution, I draw upon educator, Michelle Lebaron's (1991) alternative "ways of creative knowing," where I find practical examples of arational knowing. In the field of education, I look to the pedagogy of Henry Giroux's (1988) critical theory of "border pedagogy" and art educator, Ken Beittel's (1979) concept of "epistemological pluralism." Within curriculum theory, I dwell in William Pinar's (1985) "moments" of "*currere*." These educators are all companion travelers of the borderlands, whose ideas hold and support the unspoken qualities of the arational.

## WRITING ON THE BODY

I am sharing examples of my arts-based ritual inquiry work in an effort to make the arational process visible. The poetic writing and video of the gallery performance ritual is from my thesis research that began with exploring "body knowing". The initial performance ritual was an intuitive act, undertaken in part, to embody and understand the numerous feminists (Helene Cixous, Adrienne Rich, Susan Bordo, Luce Irigaray, amongst others), who compellingly summon women to write from their own bodies, and write with the body as a form of metaphor, and resistance.



Bickel, Barbara (2004). Private Performance Ritual. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia Endowment Lands. (video still).

The research process began with a ritual that took place in the forest of the University of British Columbia Endowment Lands. In an effort to make peace between my body and words I wrote on my entire body, physically connecting words with flesh. This personal performance ritual was witnessed by myself (the artist), the creatures of the forest, and by two women friends, who documented the event with a still and video camera for artistic and research material. The performance ritual in the gallery, witnessed by the public, nine months later completed the creative research. I share a poem that I wrote in the months between these two performance rituals, while struggling with the research process. It was spoken during the gallery performance ritual of *Who will read this body?*

## **Listening for Echoes**

Battle for articulation  
begins within.  
On the journey to body-voice  
the terrain is disjointed,  
its language inarticulate.  
Still the body breathes  
and remembers.  
Chooses once again  
to listen for echoes of flesh.

In this cavernous body  
desire and grief dwell side by side.  
Words languish in deep pools  
Expression surfacing  
with exhaustive effort.

Known vision is lost  
without connective words.  
I continue to break the murky surface,  
each stroke disrupting  
a strange comfort of silence.

## **A/R/TOGRAPHY AS RITUAL**

Within arts-based research I worked with a/r/tography as a form of inquiry that guides the exploration into arational ways of knowing. A/r/tography has its roots in action research, hermeneutics and phenomenology (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). It draws upon the skills of the artist, researcher and teacher in an alternative and evolving qualitative form of inquiry. Educator, researcher and artist, Rita Irwin explains a/r/tography as the act of the artist/researcher/teacher making art and writing, entering an inquiry process that is simultaneously complementary and resistant (Irwin, 2003). Art and writing in a/r/tography goes beyond talking, and thus engages and embodies our full selves... body,

mind, spirit and emotions. It crosses the boundaries of time, space and place (cf. Beittel, 1989/92). A/r/tography is an integrating form of inquiry that begins with studying the self, which can then move of us towards relationships of inquiry with others.

I brought forward the form of ritual within a/r/tography in my thesis as a paradoxical practice of resistance and resistance-breaking. Within this paradox lies the potential arational thread that can weave and mend the gaps that exist between the dualistic categories of the body/mind, the rational/irrational, as well as between the conflicting roles of the artist, researcher and educator. Ritual creates the sacred space/context/container for entering the often disorienting and challenging work of a/r/tography. ***Ritual essentially includes, an arational sacred practice of trans-egoic respect/awareness/openness to the creative interaction of physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual realities, within nature, culture and self, for the purpose of transformation.*** “A/r/tography as ritual” allows the researcher and research to enter subconscious (arational) and vulnerable realms of knowing. Ritual is the container or “third space” (*a la* Homi Bhabha) that allows a/r/tography to engage the challenging and risk-taking work of the arational. Accessing the arational texts of the body, and altered states within ritual, allows the ignored ‘ghosts’ and forgotten/hidden knowledges to emerge.

## EMBRACING THE ARATIONAL

In my Masters research I learned from arational sites of knowing that were accessed through art making, personal narrative, poetry, performance ritual, meditative and altered states, and the body. To further explore the concept of the arational, I draw

from Jean Gebser's (1905-1973) theory of the arational. Gebser places the *arational a-perspectival worldview* as an evolutionary step beyond the rational [egoic]. He posits that rationalism within Modernism has appointed itself as authority (master) and that this self-appointed status stands in the way of an "integral worldview" of wholeness (Tarbensen, 1997). Gebser coined the term "integral a-perspectival," where no perspective is privileged and a fluid wholistic worldview is sought. He contrasted this with formal rationality, which he called "perspectival reason," a monological perspective with a narrow (egoic) lens (Wilber, 1998, p. 131), relative to an integral lens. Gebser's theory includes the rational with the arational. The arational viewed from the hegemonic Western rational (cognitive) perspective, has most often been confused with the irrational, thus disqualifying it from being seen as a valid and significant site of learning (Tarbensen, 1997). This limited dualistic reading has kept arational forms of knowing marginalized, often pathologized and excluded from traditional educational systems. The arational, has historically been acknowledged within the mystic traditions, and by artists. As an artist-educator, I would like to expand the use of the arational beyond this marginalized positioning.

Western rationalism has dominated our educational systems (Gebser cited in Tarbensen, 1997; McLaren, 1991). Rationalism can be looked back upon as the colonial justification for suppression and forced assimilation of colonized 'Others' to civilize their barbaric (read irrational) cultures (McLaren, 1991). Rationalism, in its pathological dualistic form, has relegated, marginalized and devalued (as irrational) women and marginalized others who practice arational ways of knowing. This has left a large part of



our understanding and education of the arational underdeveloped in our Western educational systems.

The arational has been kept alive in the world and our educational systems predominantly through the arts and spiritual teachings. Philosopher-futurist designer, Buckminster Fuller (1971) refers to artists as miracles. “[A]rtists are the human beings whose comprehensivity was not pruned down by the well-meaning, but ignorant educational customs[sic] of society” (p. 43). Art educator, Ken Beittel (1984) recognizes artists as “‘verification mystics,’ ...who see impossible intuitions and traces of spirit informing matter, thereby ‘verifying’ forces well beyond their ken, for which they are nevertheless the partial medium” (p. 16). As a spiritual feminist artist, now engaged in the study of education, I am drawn to articulate an expanded pedagogy and epistemology (qualitative research agenda) that includes the arational along with the rational. An arational pedagogy would be based in a dialectic that integrates all forms of knowing and learning.

Ken Beittel (1984) calls for an “epistemological pluralism for research in art education (Beittel, 1979, 1980-81) on the assumptions that ‘art knowledge’ and ‘art knowing’ are not reducible to any one world view and its related truth claims” (p. 15). He acknowledges Western philosophers such as Habermas, Pepper, and Weiss for their contributions to ideological critiques but states that they themselves became stuck in their own “mentalistic self-limiting ideas” (p. 15). He positions art as the best vehicle to realize how “mind and spirit can inform matter” (p. 20). He interprets Heidegger as, not espousing, ...what is prerational, arational, nor irrational, but pointing to what is transrational. In short, he is offering a metaphysics which goes beyond the

cognitively bound hope for transcendence of the mental [egoic] found in Pepper... Habermas... Hausman... and others. He does so through the route of meditative thinking, thinking dialogue, and awaiting the call of Being. For this, the work of art, a transmental phenomenon positioned precariously, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) put it, between perception and reflection, ahead of psychology and prior to philosophy, is the readiest and most likely symbol. (p. 16)

Beittel's work has articulated for me what I have known intuitively as an artist and have longed to be able to voice. The depth of his work calls me to continue my a/r/tographic work to further understand the arational, moving towards a transrational perspective.

In the field of law, educator Michelle LeBaron's (2002) work offers practical approaches based on her years of conflict resolution work, of arational perspectives. She wrote of relational and "creative ways of knowing as resources for bridging conflict" (p. 43), moving beyond a solely rational model of conflict work. She describes four ways of knowing; emotional, somatic, imaginative/intuitive, and connected. She claims that within the emotional ways of knowing, "[e]motions, [are] felt through the body, [and] are one of our most direct sources of strength and energy" (p. 45). Within somatic ways of knowing she reminds us of the wisdom of the body, that emotions and non-verbal connections with others are often made known to us through our bodies and not our intellect (p. 82). Within the imaginative and intuitive ways of knowing she wrote:

...we consider our waking dreams and the power they have in our lives.

Imagination is the fuel of these waking dreams; it orients, animates, and engages us in the process of becoming who we are. (p. 102)

She then wrote of

...the spaciousness of connected ways of knowing” [where] [c]onconnected ways of knowing are evoked in relationship, wether within ourselves or with others; they reference something more expansive than our personalities. (p. 141)

In Lebaron’s work I see arational ways of knowing being integrated and valued.

As I read curriculum theory (Pinar, 1994, 2004) and the work of critical pedagogues (Giroux, 1988; McLaren, 1991), I hear a call for an expanded and critical pedagogy that advocates for and encourages interdisciplinary, spiritually-based (self-reflexive) and arts-based forms of inquiry in their theories of learning (see also Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). I draw upon the writing of these critical theorists and their call for a pedagogy that does not marginalize the “Other.” I include the arational as a marginalized “Other” within the “so-called cultural evolution of the Anglo-Saxon white male” (McLaren, 1991, p. 29). I argue, with critical thinkers (e.g. Wilber) that the arational transcends, yet integrates, the rational and the irrational. To work with the arational within education we must let go of controlling what we have mastery (control) of and move into space/territory that is unknown and unfamiliar, not unlike a dialectic method of pedagogy. It is often within this dialectic space that new understandings emerge, where we can see old patterns with ‘new eyes’. This is not always a comfortable space to dwell within. It is here that creating ritual space as a container for transformation becomes important.

Henry Giroux (1988) brings forward the ethical and political responsibility of education and educators. In his theory of “border pedagogy of postmodern resistance” (p. 165) he questions who is able to “speak with authority and certainty for all humanity” (p.

163). This “[b]order pedagogy decenters as it remaps. The terrain of learning becomes inextricably linked to the shifting parameters of place, identity, history and power” (p. 166). He asks that educators work to understand “how the experience of marginality at the level of everyday life lends itself to forms of oppositional and transformative consciousness” (1991, p. 251). Within his border pedagogy I recognize a place for working with marginalized arational processes. He wrote:

...knowledge forms emanating from the margins can be used to redefine the complex, multiple, heterogeneous realities that constitute those relations of difference that make up the experiences of students who often find it impossible to define their identities through the cultural and political codes of a single, unitary culture. (p. 168)

I now turn to curriculum theorist William Pinar’s (1994) theory of *currere*, which was formed as a method for cultivating an authentic investigation of an internal dialectic (p. 119) along with political “analysis of the socio-economic system[s], of hegemony” (p.131). Of this work he wrote, that it:

... feels like a voyage out, from the habitual, the customary, the taken-for-granted, toward the unfamiliar, the more spontaneous, the questionable. The experimental posture in its most profound meaning suggests this openness to what is **not known**, a willingness to attempt action the consequences of which cannot be predicted fully. Such a capacity to risk—intellectually, biographically—can be cultivated.... It is a capacity those of us interested in education are obliged to develop. (p. 149) (bold, my emphasis)

The arational perspective supported by ritual space provides a location for this intellectual risk-taking, where Pinar (2004) reminds us “the theorist must continually be willing to give oneself up, including one’s point of view.” (p. 119). Pinar (2004) wrote of the “moments” of “*currere*”: the regressive, the progressive, the analytical, and the synthetic (p. 35). These moments break down the journey of ‘running the course’ or site of learning with a full engagement and integration of the past, present, and future (pp. 36-37). When the moment of synthesis is complete, the person is infused with a clear energy source, similar to LeBaron’s theory that energy comes from our direct experience of knowing through emotions. The arational perspective, which is not bound by time or place, flows through these moments freely and chaotically.

## TURNING WITH THE ARATIONAL

Through engaging and integrating arational forms of learning in the inquiry process, educators, art and artists that critically inquire and educate, can extend sites of resistance and conflict into sites of learning. Differences and conflicts cannot be solved or understood by rationalism alone. A combination of strategies and ways of knowing and learning are essential in an expanding global environment, where education holds the possibility of transforming rigid and enclosing worldviews.

I am fortunate as a practicing artist and performance ritual artist to be familiar with dwelling in the *unknown* and *arational* territory of the creative learning and inquiry process. As an emergent a/r/tographer, I am challenged to share this skill, as well as evolve with it. Addressing challenging ethical, educational and theoretical questions and problems requires a constant willingness to enter areas of discomfort, vulnerability,

resistance, ambiguity and disagreement, without limiting or shutting down the creative, researching and learning experience. Dialectic learning (as critical theory promotes) can be augmented by an arational approach to learning.

I have found that combining ritual within a/r/tography allows the weaving and mending of gaps instilled between the mind/body, the rational/irrational, as well as the artist, researcher and educator in our society. This process has in turn brought the arational forward as an overarching lens that can facilitate the troubling reappearance of important and hidden fragments of disqualified knowledge within history. Returning to the question “How can education embrace the space of the arational as a site of learning?” I suggest that the growing inquiry approach of a/r/tography, contained within ritual, can begin to decenter the margins and open borderlands within educational discourses--allowing artists, researchers, and educators (teachers) to lead the way to a transformative integrative a-perspectival post-postmodernism.

I close this paper, that has drawn many words from my body, with a short poem from my thesis,

She reaches inward  
listening for echoes  
of flesh  
formed  
in words.



Bickel, B. (2004). *Who will read this body? Public Performance Ritual*.  
Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia AMS Gallery. (video still)

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