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From Artist to A/r/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body

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*All her flesh exposed. Crouched articulation of a circle on the pine and cedar
forest floor. Civilization left behind, sun and tree shadows dance across her
surfaces. Smudging a layer of fine dust across her skin. She prepares her
body for writing pronouns. Her menstrual iron-red blood meandering picto-
graphic signs for those willing to read her body.*

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.¹

This essay draws from my Masters thesis² where the purpose of my inquiry was to critically reflect on my feminist art practice of the past twelve years, engaging the art in a new body of work, to enable my practice to reflect back onto itself. My desire throughout the thesis was to relocate and join the life-enriching practices of art, ritual, and research, within a paradigm of life-long learning. The practice of a/r/tography (Irwin, de Cosson, Springgay, Kind, 2003) emerged in this study as a powerful corrective and integrated form of living inquiry. A/r/tography

¹ The poems entitled *Listening for Echoes* and *Conception* were written at different points in my research, and became part of the public performance ritual of *If/bo will read this body?* Segments of the two poems are placed throughout the essay to offer examples of the arational locations that I was working within during the research process.

² Bickel, Barbara (2004). *From artist to a/r/tographer: An autoethnographic ritual inquiry into writing on the body*. Unpublished masters thesis. Vancouver, BC: The University of British Columbia.

has roots in hermeneutic inquiry, arts-based, and action research. It is a self-reflexive form of living inquiry that draws upon and interweaves the roles of the artist/researcher/teacher through the process of art making and writing.

The research question guiding the inquiry was: *What does it mean to have an ethical and aesthetic feminist art practice?* A multimedia art installation³ entitled, *Who will read this body?* was the culmination of the thesis art and research. The exhibition documented the often fragmented and uncertain journey of integrating text and the body through art, ritual, and writing.

The performance ritual that took place within the gallery setting was a living embodiment of text, art, and the body. The thesis writing took place in the quiet self-reflective months following the exhibition and performance rituals. The making of the art and performance rituals was intense, challenging, and chaotic. These were familiar locations for me as an artist. My discomfort grew as I entered the self-reflexive writing phase that became my thesis.

Within the inquiry, self-exposure was the guiding principle; exposing myself as an artist, researcher, and educator through the process of art-making and writing. As I began the writing of the thesis I was drawn out beyond myself to break the silence of my comfortable nonverbal art. The unknown led the inquiry and writing process. Entering this space, I re-experienced a deep terror and danger masked as shame in exposing myself visually, and in writing within a pathological patriarchal society. I was increasingly drawn into the complex relations between shame, art, text, and the transformative question of "currere" (Grumet & Pinar, 1976) surfacing in the art-making and writing process.

To begin my inquiry, I documented a private performance ritual, which became key to the research. I chose to exhibit the video (see image below) as well as the black and white photo documentation in art installation pieces to the public (see front cover image). The decision to expose my autoethnographic research (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) as art was extremely difficult. It was a private and personal act made public and thus broke cultural taboos of revealing the naked female body and menstrual blood. In my dilemma of deciding upon the significance of exhibiting this research as art I asked myself: *How can exposing images of*

³ The exhibition consisted of two video pieces played on TV screens, a video projection on wood, mixed media collages on wood, body cast & paper sculptures, and a floor installation.

the body that elicit shame and disturbance be a form of pedagogy? My response was and continues to be: that modeling vulnerability as a woman in a sexist world is a teaching, a reminding, an embodying, a validating, a liberating, and a gift. The research and art demonstrated the act of troubling the reconciliation between the mind and the body. It was meant to be witnessed, remembered, questioned, thought about, and written about.

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.

The Body, Education and Ritual

My obsession as an artist has been the body. I filter questions and ideas through the lens of the human body. The body has been a constant teacher and home for me in the midst of an unstable, and often threatening and silencing world. As I worked in this study with my own body as a site of research and learning I re-experienced this truth. The body has not been a valued location of learning and knowledge creation in our western society (Cixious, 1997; Bordo, 1997; Irigaray, 1994). Art has been my language of choice to communicate with the world about this disconnection—to trouble it and to challenge it. Dwelling within the nonverbal environment of my art, committed to giving voice to the body, led me to ritual.

Within the private performance ritual that initiated this work, I wrote on my entire naked body. Surrounded by the forest, the creatures of the forest, and witnessed by two women friends I entered a ritual process of reuniting body and text that I knew was required for me to begin my academic research. It was within this earthy, supportive environment that I began to bring together the body and words, literally responding to the call by many feminist writers for women to write from their body and/or with their body.



Bickel, B. (2003). *Who will read this body?* video still. Vancouver: University of British Columbia AMS Gallery (video documentation by Nane' Jordan).

This ritual transforming of my flesh into a ground for my words became the basis of my a/r/tographic inquiry. In choosing to share this experience as art, I encountered a deeply internalized sense of shame. In deciding to continue, working through my shame and resistances to the inquiry, I experienced the reintegration of flesh and text, which became a personal transformative experience.

Avowed now
to read no text
female bare

The body
skin peeled and
arched back
into memory,
rights fragments
spins red words
together

The art exhibition ended with a performance ritual in the gallery, where I invited the larger community into a third/liminal space with me. In this experience we were co-witnesses. After witnessing the performance ritual a dialogue was entered exploring the question: *What form of*

communication brings you closest to mystery? As an artist I have been able to keep mystery, the liminal, in-between space present in my life. It is an essential part of my ethical feminist pedagogical practice to take on the challenge of sharing this space with others. I have done this through public performance rituals, artist or a/r/tographer talks, working collaboratively, and exhibiting art in a context that respects the viewer as well as the art.

Annunciation of
the mysteries
delivered in
unrefined
unwound textures

A Pedagogy of "knowing" and "not knowing"

In reflecting pedagogically on the work of my thesis I found myself questioning knowledge pedagogically. Shoshona Felman (1997) states that the Western pedagogical rationalist ideal culminates in Hegel's philosophical didactic concept of "absolute knowledge" and argues that this absolute knowledge then completes all that there is to know. She then draws upon Lacan's conception of the unconscious as "knowledge which can't tolerate one's own knowing that one knows" (Seminar, Feb. 19, 1974; unpublished, p. 24). This "human knowledge is, by definition, ... that which rules out any possibility of ... eradicating its own ignorance" (pp. 24-25). Lacan's "poetic pedagogy" leads us "to learn from and through the insight which [like the poet and the artist] does not know its own meaning, [to learn] from and through the knowledge which is not entirely in mastery—in possession—of itself" (p. 40-41).

Foucault (Felman, 1997) wrote about "an archeological approach to the history of knowledge and the loss of knowledges" that have been disqualified as inadequate to the task or insufficiently elaborated: naïve knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy..." (p. 16). The disregard of valuable knowledge held within the senses, the body, and intuition is a tragic loss of "arational"⁴ knowledge building and hence the disqualifying and ignoring of creative and alternative perspectives in the world. The methods of ritual, trance, poetry, and art-making that I em-

⁴ The arational, as a form of knowing includes the body, the emotions, the senses, intuition, the imagination, creation making, the mystical, spiritual, and the relational, alongside the rational.

ployed in my a/r/tographic inquiry were containers for "arational" or subconscious knowledge to emerge within. Because of its commitment to inquiry through the multiple lenses of the artist, researcher, and teacher, a/r/tography has the potential to facilitate the reappearance of important and hidden pieces of disqualified knowledge within history. It achieves this by working with rational and "arational" processes of inquiry, through a disciplined creative practice that merges reflexive writing, academic research, and pedagogical practice.

A/r/tography

A/r/tography is an alternative and evolving form of inquiry. Educator, researcher, and artist, Rita Irwin (2003), explains a/r/tography as the act of the "artist/researcher/teacher art-making and writing offer[ing] complementary yet resistant forms of recursive inquiry." She further describes "A/r/tography [a]s a fluid orientation creating its rigor through continuous reflexivity, discourse analysis, and hermeneutic inquiry" (p. 8).

Addressing challenging ethical, educational, and theoretical questions and problems requires a constant willingness within each domain (art, research, and education) to enter areas of discomfort, resistance, ambiguity, and disagreement without limiting or shutting down the creative, researching and learning experience of a/r/tography. The historical separation of religion, science, and art, although important as a movement to differentiate and foster a greater depth of knowledge within each discipline, has left modern society bereft of an integrated knowledge that is capable of a full and healthy embracing of the world in all its diversity (Wilber, 1996). Art was a leading voice in the paradigm shift from premodern to modern. The growing theory of a/r/tography I believe has the elements to lead us into an integrated and transformative post-postmodernism.⁵

The freedom of individual expression in art-making without responsibility is challenged within the framework of a/r/tography. The social constructions and constraints of artists, researchers, and teachers are opened up and altered within a/r/tography. At its best, a/r/tography encourages the combined creative freedom and risk-taking of the artist, the

⁵ "We are in a moment of *post-postmodernism*, conscious of all that has come before, tired of deconstruction, uncertain about the future, but convinced that there is no turning back. I agree with Stuart Hall that the use of *post* in post-modern and post-postmodern means that we have extended, not abandoned, the terrain of past philosophical work." (Becker, 2002, p. 26).

rigor and responsibility of the academic researcher, along with the ethics and compassion of the educator. In taking on the question in my thesis: *What does it mean to me to have an ethical and aesthetic feminist art practice?* I evolved from the singular identity/role of artist to the plural identity/role of a/r/tographer. A/r/tography required that I not let go of my role as artist in this evolution, but add to it the roles of researcher, educator, and writer. The thesis exposed my journey from artist to a/r/tographer. In sharing my experience of the a/r/tographic inquiry, my desire was to intrigue as well as invite artists that are educators, artists interested in their art as research and education, and art educators into an exploration of a/r/tography.

A/r/tography as Ritual

The form of ritual that I worked with is not bound by religious identification or segregation but is a relational aesthetic between individuals and mystery. In his book, *Liberating Rites: Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*, Tom Driver (1997) writes that:

We learn by doing. This includes the doing of ritual. What we learn by doing ritual is not only the ritual and how it has been performed before.... We discover something of the world the ritual belongs to and aims to transform (p. 188).

Ritual is the container that held the often confusing, yet ever emerging and transformative experiences and findings within the research project.

Through my thesis inquiry, I found that combining ritual within a/r/tography allowed the weaving and mending of gaps instilled between the mind/body as well as those placed between the artist, researcher, and educator in our society. My understanding of ritual has evolved through and with my art practice. I suggest that:

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.

Accessing the "arational" texts of the body, and altered states within my rituals, allowed the ignored ghosts and forgotten/hidden knowledge (for myself and others) to emerge. It was within this container that the metaphoric death and transformation of my modern artist self to a/r/tographer self took place.

A Pedagogy of A/r/t

The thesis inquiry took me through a phenomenological journey. By exposing my pedagogy as an artist within the unfolding of an often resistant a/r/tographical study, dominant dualisms were challenged. To assist my internal struggles, I reframed/re-appropriated educational language into the language of art. In experiencing and claiming performance ritual as pedagogy; recognizing art making as research and art as curriculum making; I phenomenologically worked and reworked the body as text. Allowing the differentiated categories of art, education, ritual, research, and curriculum to intermingle and blend within my own body and practice, contributes to the re-forging and re-integrating of the divided realms of religion, science, and art within the larger society (Wilber, 1996).

A/r/tography as a form of living inquiry has the potential to challenge embedded and hidden oppressive ways of being and knowing, educating, researching, and living thus offering a bridge towards pedagogical awareness for artists who teach without formal education training. As a rigorous form of inquiry, a/r/tography holds the potential for artists, researchers, and educators to move beyond their own practiced disciplines, to access knowledge that is often hidden in comfortable/trained ways of knowing within disciplines. The ability that a/r/tography has to find the holes, gaps, folds, and undersides (Springgay, Irwin, & Wilson, 2004) in our ways of being/learning in the world, are significant for all disciplines of Art Education and Art.

To practice an art form and to inquire a/r/tographically in one's life leads to new channels and endless strategies for responding creatively and authentically to art, curriculum, art students, life, and the world. By bringing new questions to the surface through art, rigid and dogmatic thought patterns have the opportunity to transform. As an example, through this inquiry I came to admit that I privileged the body over the mind as a source of knowledge. In doing so, I embedded myself within, and perpetuated the same oppressive dualism that has negated the body within our Western society. I also came to recognize how I have privileged immanence over transcendence and realized how I have lived the tension between the polarization of immanence and transcendence daily as a female in this society. Through this thesis inquiry, I have acquired an increased awareness of agency, responsibility, authority, and ethics that will impact my future work as an artist, researcher, and pedagogue.

Artist Education

The percentage of artists that are practicing art even five years after they graduate is extremely low. A/r/tography is a practice that can reinvigorate an isolated and struggling art practice. Learning a/r/tographic skills while still in an art training institution would be a beneficial contribution to artists and society. If the artist's visionary and prophetic voice is essential to a healthy society, we need to be teaching ethics and inquiry skills to artists while they are in training.

There are often few choices available for an artist graduating with fine arts training to continue their art practice. A/r/tography offers an additional and unique option to artists that are committed to, or want to commit to a meaningful art practice. This option comes with a critical artistic/academic/educational rigour, with greater ethical responsibility and accountability given to the community, than what a modern art practice would likely offer. The emergence of a/r/tography within the curriculum of Art Education speaks to the importance of nurturing and sustaining critical and transformative art practices, beyond the K-12 school system.

Underneath

When I added the question, *How do I teach ethically and aesthetically?* the thesis project modeled my answer. Teaching was not a comfortable authoritative practice. It was a constantly questioning emancipatory practice, willing to be disrupted and to disrupt itself. It exposed the unknown, the shadow, and in this, faced itself in facing others. I began this thesis inquiry as an artist committed to body literacy, enacted as (literally) writing on the body. Through the journey I evolved from an artist to an a/r/tographer. This has profoundly affected me and deepened my commitment to a critical and creative, ethical, and transformative, feminist educational art practice. And it is a life long practice.

To view more art and thesis excerpts go to: www.barbarabickel.com

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