

In summary, an a/r/tographic community of practice is a community of inquirers working as artists, researchers and pedagogues committed to personal engagement within a community of belonging who trouble and address difference. The four commitments explored here are not exhaustive but begin to illustrate the commitments a/r/tographers make to their practice. The commitments should not be seen as obligations but rather as beliefs toward a philosophy of community. An a/r/tographic community of practice is a community of inquirers working as artists and pedagogues committed to personal engagement within a community of belonging. The deeper commitments embedded in these engagements include: a commitment to a way of Being in the world, a commitment to inquiry, a commitment to negotiating personal engagement within a community of belonging, and a commitment to creating practices that trouble and address difference. These commitments, and likely others, provide a foundation from which to engage in a/r/tographic communities of practice, and indeed, to unwork these communities of practice so that they are truly collectives of praxis engaged in unsettling that which we take for granted, complexifying that which seems simple, and simplifying that which appears to be complex.

NOTES

- ¹ I wish to thank Valerie Triggs for her insights into Agamben's scholarship and more importantly, her editorial comments on an earlier draft of this chapter.

UNVEILING A SACRED AESTHETIC: A/R/TOGRAPHY AS RITUAL

Prelude: Co-creation

The idea of ritual has previously emerged in the writing of a/r/tographers (Springgay, Irwin and Kind, in press; Wilson, 2004). This essay further addresses being with(in) and understanding ritual in the practice of a/r/tography. To do this I return to early experiences of ritual that emerged within my art practice. Through writing, I unfold aspects of ritual that continue to touch and in/form my practice as an a/r/tographer today. My present lens and practice as an a/r/tographer assists the reflective process and further illuminates these early ritual experiences, weaving together theoretical understandings of a/r/tography as ritual with the process of making and sharing art within community.

Becoming community is an ongoing process that requires an engaged practice of being aware of ourselves as "singular plural" (Nancy, 2000) beings. In the evolution of my practice as a singular artist, ritual has remained a vital element, encouraging a mutual relational aesthetic within art making, inquiry, teaching and learning within the plurality of community. This essay furthermore begins to articulate conceptual understandings of a sacred aesthetic within ritual and encourages others to reflect upon and explore these qualities and practices within their own a/r/tographic processes.

Within the two particular art exhibition openings and the co-created art I describe below, the relational, sacred, and aesthetic were re-united through conscious honouring of co-creation. This is in contrast to a predominantly individualistic and secular contemporary art world. Matthew Fox (1988) wrote, "...mutuality is presumed in the term *co-creation*. Divinity and we are co-creators, equally responsible...for the kinds of personalities, relationships, lifestyles, politics, and economics that we birth" (p.201). The mutual and sacred aspects of ritual require a compassionate awareness of the other as divine and calls for a caring responsibility within acts of co-creation.

The outcome of ritual is often "evocative and/or provocative," assisting each person involved to think critically, moving beyond patterned and comfortable ways of thinking and being with others, towards new perspectives and transformative learning experiences. Ritual elegantly supports the practice of a/r/tography, which interweaves "the arts with scholarly writing through living inquiry" (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, in press, p.2). In doing so, it complicates traditional understandings of what art, research and education are. The essay concludes with ways of awaking to ritual within practices of art making and offers a simple structure for entering and implementing ritual within an a/r/tographic practice.

Journal Entry Summer 1994:

It is a warm summer evening in Calgary and I am going to an art opening at a new gallery where the work of an artist, who is also a spiritual teacher and healer,² is taking place. Many people are gathered, conversations are raptly engaged with the art, and the wine is flowing. In the midst of this atmosphere the artist begins to address us. He ritually invokes cosmic spirit energies and begins to tell the creation stories of the art, honouring the people that have been involved with its birth. I listen with a sense of awe. He becomes in that moment an artist-mentor for me as I witness the reverence of ritual taking place at a commercial art gallery opening. My familiar notions of what an art gallery opening is supposed to be, transforms. This is how I want my art openings presented to the public.

Journal Entry Summer 1995:

I am working on my first major community art project since completing my fine arts degree. It is entitled *Sisters*.³ I have just finished six weeks of working in a temporary studio in Victoria with six women friends from high school, including my younger foster sister. These women—who have had a significant impact on my life—upon invitation have agreed to join me in a collaborative art project exploring the theme of sisterhood.⁴ This is the first of two travelling studio visits in this project. I am also travelling to my birth sister's home in the US where I will set up a temporary studio in her family room. The remaining twenty-two women, including my mother and stepdaughters, are working with me in my Calgary studio, where I currently live and work. Women friends⁵ have been willing to travel from as far away as England, Ontario, Saskatchewan and neighbouring cities in Alberta to be part of this project. The significance of the bonds and desire for sisterhood are hard to ignore or downplay in the expressed effort of these women, some of whom I have not been in contact with for over ten years.

Tonight, on this unusually hot summer evening, we eat sushi and drink wine together with friends and family. We mingle amidst the six completed art pieces hung on the studio walls, celebrating—with tentativeness—our bodies and beings, as “sisters” represented in our co-created art pieces.

Following the completion of the art in Victoria, I returned to Calgary with the art. Each of us assumed, without question, that the completed art belonged to me. Once home, I found I was reluctant to show the art to anyone. After much personal reflection, I realized I had erred in not troubling the assumption that the art belonged to me alone. To exhibit this work, and a larger body of work I was in the midst of co-creating, required a greater awareness and permission on the part of the women to release the art to me and to the larger world. With this new understanding, it became clear to me that a further gesture needed to take place if this art was going to be shared with society. Five months following the small studio exhibition in Victoria,

the gesture became a co-created gallery performance ritual,⁶ on the opening night of the *Sisters* exhibition.

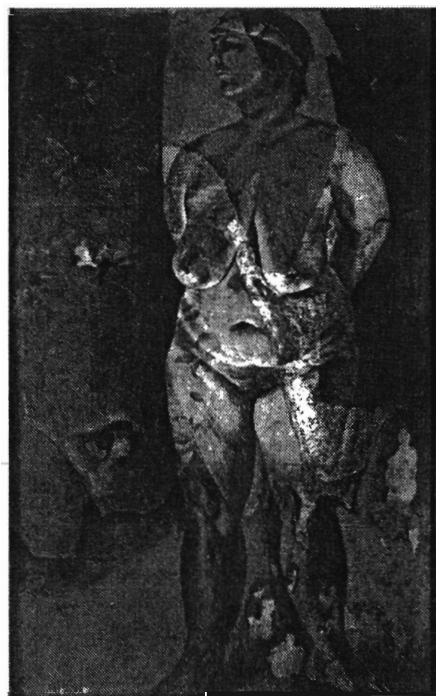


Returning Home. 1995. Barbara Bickel; co-created with Helen Bickel. Mixed media drawing and collage on wood. 48"x 36". Calgary AB: The Centre Gallery.

Reflections on Returning Home

Returning Home (see image above) was co-created with my mother. The symbols that she chose to represent sisterhood reflect our mother-daughter relationship. The fabric that she sat upon was a quilt that we had made together a few years earlier. The woollen afghan wrapped around her body was a wedding gift that she knit for

my partner and I. The ball of yarn that she gazed into is a remaining remnant of that gift. Emerging from the dark background are the symbols of her Christian faith—a cross and three lit candles. Reluctant to expose her body as naked flesh she chose to cover herself in the relational warmth of her daughter's bedding. The experience of co-creating this piece was held within an unspoken sacred ritual space of mutual openness, appreciation and joy in creating and witnessing each other in the creative process. Reflecting now on the dark background from which her image emerges, I can see how it foreshadows the apophati⁷ spiritual quest that I had begun to enter. The co-created art piece that affirmed her religious faith ran counter to my entry into a spiritual journey of unknowing and de-affirmation of a dogmatic Christian faith. Inviting my mother to participate in the public performance ritual illuminated signs of strain in our diverging spiritual paths. She was uncomfortable with the use of the word ritual in the art invitation as it represented taboos that her Christian faith warned against. Despite her discomfort she chose to participate and publicly affirmed her Christian faith at the unveiling of her art piece.



Warrior Mother. 1995. Barbara Bickel; co-created with Susan Nabors. Mixed media drawing and collage on wood. 48" x 30". Calgary AB: The Centre Gallery.

Reflections on Warrior Mother

Standing firmly, rooted in relationships with women, *Warrior Mother* (see image above) inspires the experience of sisterhood to step boldly forward. Susan's symbols of sisterhood where photographs of her female relations: her grandmother, her mother, her daughters, and herself pregnant with her second daughter, along with images of fruit representing female fertility. These images were embedded into the ground of her art piece, supporting and reminding her of her place in a lineage of beautiful women. She chose to wear only a bandana on her head to mark her identity as a warrior mother in a line of warrior mothers. I share this story as it reflects Susan's desire to extend her understanding of sisters into the world. As a surprise, her husband purchased the art piece and gave it to her as a gift. She was not happy with the well-intended gift, as she had fully let the art go in the performance ritual and preferred that it travel into the world, impacting others rather than staying with her. Her desire reflects the words of artist, researcher, educator, Kenneth Beittel (1985) who writes: "Art serves the evolution of consciousness because it serves the thirst deep in each soul for transcendence. The giving of one's art is a tangible symbol that we have not sold out" (p.51). In the end, she chose to accept the gift, allowing it to find a place within the entrance of her own home where she could firsthand hear the impact that it had on people entering.

Gathering Women: A Sacred Relational Aesthetic

In 1991, I began to question the artist-model relationship as an art student working with hired models in class settings. I could find little meaning beyond working with the body as an abstract, technical form to be rendered. As much as I loved the physical structure of the human body, it alone was not enough to give meaning to my art practice. Instead, I found satisfaction in the living relationship of a shared creative process and inquiry between myself and the person whose body experience I was witnessing⁸ and drawing. I, in turn, was witnessed by the person with whom I was engaged in the creative process. Canadian artist and religious scholar Susan Shantz (1999) describes the feminine spiritual path as one of longing for a centre, a place of meaning; a sacred space where one's existence is opened up rather than confined (p.67-68). My longing for shared creative experience has led me to a mutually collaborative practice of art making with others. It is here I have found that my personal desire to co-create often runs parallel to the desire of others to co-create. For a short period of time, we consciously live the existence of "being-with-another" in a "singularly plural existence" (Nancy, 2000, p.3). I am called to work with community in my art and to openly engage in a co-creative and sacred process of inquiry. A sacred and relational aesthetic (Bourriaud, 2002) feeds the core of my art practice.⁹ By sacred, I mean honouring, receiving, and holding reverence for the spirit of mystery that is ever-unfolding between humans, the environment, and the cosmos (Wilber, 1996).

In an effort to honour the gifts that I receive as an artist working with others, I have, over the years, acknowledged those who have allowed me to photograph and

draw their bodies, as co-creator (Fox, 1988), collaborator (Irwin *et al.*, 1999; Roberts, 1981; Torbert, 1981), and co-researcher (Heron, 1981). The degree to which my co-creators are collaborative¹⁰ and directly part of the art making process varies, from allowing me to fully guide those involved by making the decisions in the process, to collaboratively making decisions on the image and the materials to be used, and in some cases, to working directly on the art piece with me. A relational aesthetic involves a negotiated co-creative practice of give and take, connection and disconnection, while striving to be mutually honouring and supportive.

Rupture: The Politics of Representation

Some of the women in the *Sisters* project struggled with the representation arrived at in the co-created art piece. They had trouble accepting the visual image that was reflected back to them, despite the fact that we had mutually agreed upon the pose and or photograph that was to be drawn. These were often painful struggles of an undeniable power relationship between me as the artist and the women as models. It was further complicated by a criticality of self-image on the woman's part as model, and my trained critical eye as an artist for a quality aesthetic in the art product. Artist-educator Susan Stewart (1993) wrote of the potential transformative power of collaboration that can address power relations directly:

In this process of grappling with power relations rests the means of transforming them, both at a personal level, and socially and politically. Collaboration is an alternative and highly resistant model of creative interaction. It is a process that demonstrates a method of art making which can be democratic, transformative, and empowering, and which has the potential to renew and build community. (pp.43-44)

The co-creative process within the *Sisters* project required a dialogue that was unfamiliar to myself and the women. I was inviting participation in an art process where the women did not necessarily feel confident. I, in turn, had to work creatively to solve artistic problems that, as a trained artist working independently, I would not have encountered. Honestly sharing our feelings about the art piece in process and at completion was, at times, a great challenge.

In situations where there was an obvious struggle regarding the art being created, my co-creator and I made every effort to communicate and work through the rupture. In terms of her representation, one woman experienced great difficulty in the co-creative process. She could not be satisfied with her choice of how she was to be represented. Following numerous conversations, we eventually resolved the dilemma by representing her "real" self by ritually erasing the art piece together. Trinh Minh-ha (2005) addressed these appearances and disappearances of the "real", writing: "In this realm of the immaterial the accent is not so much on the spectacular appearances as on the underlying disappearances that happen with every appearance" (p.16-17). As our ritual destruction of the drawing left her without art representation in the project, I suggested that she choose a piece of plain wood that could be framed and hung in the gallery. We titled this blank piece

Death of the Image. In the gallery performance ritual,¹¹ she was able to verbally and symbolically share her journey of appearance/disappearance/reappearance that took place through the letting go of her physical image, while being witnessed by those attending.

The performance ritual—the unveiling of the art by the women and myself at the art opening of *Sisters*—was an extension of the emergent private rituals that took place in the studio. Within the gallery, each art piece was covered with a veil. A walkway was left clear around the circumference of the gallery. A co-created altar¹² was in the centre of the gallery. It held objects that represented sisterhood and that were brought by the women. The audience members were seated around the altar and were not able to see the art prior to the performance ritual. During the performance ritual, I walked with each woman to her art piece and we unveiled the art together. Once the art was revealed, the woman spoke, read poetry or stood in silence, offering her art to the audience. The gallery performance ritual gave the women a location to publicly present their personal responses and their understanding of the art to those witnessing the unveiling. In some cases, the discord between myself as the artist and they as the models were resolved through this ritual, in others the conflict was acknowledged, yet remained present.

As an artist, my professional standards were often challenged as I found myself having to let go of the impulse to edit the final pieces that did not meet my aesthetic and artistic discernment. I had to work hard to come to a place of resolve that honoured the relational co-creative process of the art project, the quality of the final art piece, and the exhibition. This experience was fraught with anxiety and questions—what is art for—and ultimately expanded my understanding of art as a relational community-based experience. Collaboratively working with twenty-nine women was an amazing gift that simultaneously included transformative intimate relationships and personal artistic and relationship anguish. The art exhibition ultimately represented the failures and hurts of sisterhood, as well as its beauty and power. Each woman's experience brought to the fore prior unspoken or unformulated thoughts regarding female relationships.

Performing Ritual

[Ritual is]... neither a detached contemplation of the world nor a passive symbolization of it but is the performance of an act in which people confront one kind of power with another, and rehearse their own future. (Driver, 1997, p.188)

Ritual has been a deeply engrained part of my life since my birth. As the daughter of a Christian Minister, my life was punctuated by cyclical sacred holidays, or what are called liturgical rituals (Grimes, 1995). Anthropologist Victor Turner has expanded the traditional image of liturgical ritual and extended the imaginary of ritual to "threshold-crossing" (cited in Grimes, p.60). I was re-introduced to rituals framed in this way, through women's circles that celebrated women's biological cycles as well as earth-based rituals that follow the cycle of the year. My spiritual journey opened anew with this threshold crossing into non-discursive and creative bodily and earth-based ritual practices that were free expressions of mystery.

Concurrently, I crossed a career threshold and committed myself to a full-time art practice.

Unfolding in the 1990s, I eventually found validation for my art practice, which resonated with the feminist art of the 1970s. This art movement emerged out of the North American Women's Movement (i.e., Ana Mendieta, Mary Beth Edelson, Judy Chicago, and Hannah Wilke) and challenged the Western art canon by incorporating body art, ritual, and the expression of a female self (Gloria Fenman Orenstein, 1987; Lucy Lippard, 1995). I recognize in retrospect the importance of choosing to practice art full-time and how that activated a ritualizing spiritual practice in my personal and professional life.

I acknowledge that ritual is also a word that can illicit a response of mistrust, as it can and has been used to silence and control others. Mistrust emerged most profoundly in my mother's response to the use of the word outside of a sanctioned religious ceremony and institution. Because of its power and transformative ability, ritual can be used destructively as well as productively (Driver, 1997; Pryer, 2002). Yet when performance rituals have the intention of affirmation, expressing our experience of mystery, letting go, transformation and a re-inscribing of female experience, it can function as a subversion to limiting cultural norms.

To assist in theoretically understanding the form of ritual that has evolved within my art practice, I turn to the work of ritual scholar Ronald Grimes (1995). Grimes acknowledged the consistent role that artists play in bringing "emergent ritual" into society through art and artistic performances, acting as vehicles to awaken reflexive consciousness in society. "Ritual enactment at once awakens the reflexivity of consciousness and tranquilizes the anxiety provoked by doing so" (p.69). He illuminated an understanding of "nascent ritual" or emergent ritual and challenged the study of ritual to focus not only on historical and established rituals, but to study the new creation of ritual in postmodern society. He positioned rituals not as set structures but as "structurings" that "surge and subside, ebb and flow" (p.62). Grimes credited ritualizing as an important mode of knowing. Within ritualizing, the "'knower and known' are conjoined" (p.69). He reminds us that research happens not just on ritual but in ritual. Ritual is a structuring that we can create, explore, learn, and teach within.

The *Sisters* project was my initiation into public performance rituals, which have since become a vital component of each of my major art projects. It is through collaboration with co-creators, with other artists, and in sharing my art with the public in a sacred context, that I have expanded my understanding of the world and myself. I am a relational learner, and ritual offers a sacred place for relational learning. Educator Allison Pryer (2002) wrote, "[r]itual is a catalyst for processes of innovation and creativity, and thus generative of new knowledge" (p.144). Ritual has been the sacred container that has allowed me to take risks and extend my art practice beyond the limiting modernist notions that question what is art and who is an artist. Entering ritual allows one to engage in what can be a profound inquiry. The emergence of ritual that has occurred within the inquiry practice of a/r/tography is not surprising then, and further assists us in moving beyond traditional notions of research and knowledge.

Emergent ritual as described by Grimes offers a fluid structure that can augment the creative process. In its simplest form, ritual offers a structure¹³ that includes: 1) an intention which grounds and clarifies the purpose of the work to be done within the ritual, 2) a chosen and or created sacred space which acts as a container within which to do the work of the ritual, 3) an intentional form of witnessing that may or may not include other human beings and, 4) some form of closure that allows one to step outside of the ritual process and return to ordinary life. Ritual enacted within this simple structure has the ability to contain and hold with reverence what may seem disturbing, unfamiliar, too complex, too simple, or too special to enter into the ordinary reality of everyday life.

Through the process of co-creating in the *Sisters* project, I came to realize that I was not in ordinary reality with the women. Upon reflection, I recognize the unfolding structure of the ritual process with each woman's co-creation through: 1) having a clear intention of our work exploring sisterhood, 2) entering the sanctuary of the studio space together, 3) co-witnessing each other in the act of creating and, 4) deciding when we were complete, sharing some of our feelings about the art created and our experience together, and leaving the studio space.

The performance ritual in the gallery became an essential gesture to honour and extend the co-creative learning aspect of the art project. I wrote letters to the women in Victoria, sharing my insight of needing to release their art images into the world ritually and inviting them to take part in the performance ritual—if not physically, then in writing. A few of the women did share in writing their experience and what they learned through the co-creation, and these were read at the opening performance ritual.

The co-creation of the performance ritual itself offered an opportunity for all of the women that I had been working with individually, to come together as a group. Some knew each other well, others did not. During this next layer of the co-creative process, the women were able to share their experiences with each other and support each other in preparation to present a collective experience of sisterhood to the public. The intention set for the performance ritual was to release their images to the larger world. Simultaneously, it was a celebration, an honouring, and a place of closure for what had been a nine month creative process. Due to space restrictions, the audience attendance was limited to friends and family. Each woman invited supportive witnesses to be present for the ritual unveiling of the art, which for some represented a wound. Following the performance ritual, the gallery opened its doors to the general public and a celebration ensued. Ronald Grimes (1995) wrote of the significance of the responsive presence of a community of witnesses for ritual transformation into a sacred experience:

For ritualizing to occur, the surroundings must expose a vulnerable (*vulner* = wound) side. Whether the vulnerability stems from a human or divine face does not seem definitive, but some aspect of the cosmos must appear to be responsive in order for ritualizing to gestate. The more deeply an enactment is received, the more an audience becomes congregation and the more a performance becomes ritualized. "Sacred" is the name we give to the deepest forms of receptivity in our experience. (p.69)

My notion of presenting art to the public was forever altered by this opening performance ritual experience. I participated in and was profoundly transformed by this sacred ritualizing of art, which included exposing the vulnerability of beauty and wounds.¹⁴ The transformative gift of art was offered and received because of the willingness of the women to participate and the responsiveness of the witnesses that congregated.

A/r/tography as Ritual within Community

In reflecting upon and sharing the relational art and ritual making process in the *Sisters* project, I hope to amplify our understanding of the relational practice of a/r/tography. Within a community, this process can be a profound yet unsettling experience. It requires that we work consciously with differences, question the inevitable power relationships between ourselves, as artists, researchers, educators and learners (Irwin *et al.*, 2006), and open ourselves to questions of ethics¹⁵ when working with others. When roles are enacted without questioning the underlying power structures, voices within the community are often silenced and lost. We then run the risk of repeating comfortable and often oppressive patterns of learning, teaching, and making. Consequently, we lose the opportunity to transcend our partial understandings of knowing, being, and doing, which are most available to us when working within community.

The power of working and practicing within community is that we are taken outside of ourselves through the interrelational connections that develop. Despite this, we each remain individuals with diverse experiences and particular focuses within the act of inquiry. Art theorist Carol Becker (2002) solicits a sociological framing of the purpose of art where art assists in the growth and well-being of community.

We need to see art as it is—a sociological phenomenon, representative of human evolution and expression;...a link with our own collective unconscious and with out spiritual development as a species... It is through such a process that one comes to understand how art functions in the society and how important it is to society's well-being. (p.57)

This is certainly a position to be embraced by artists and a/r/tographers. By incorporating a ritual practice within my work as an artist and now as an a/r/tographer, I have a sacred structure and container that can support the entry into the collective unconscious. I am not left adrift with the intensity and diversity of the new understandings that may surface for myself, or those with whom I am working. I can bracket the rich time that is spent entering the realm of the arational,¹⁶ which is brought forward through the act of entering a creative process. I can then anchor it with the understanding that I will return to the rational and ordinary world to begin to decipher and articulate it (Beittel & Beittel, 1991).

Engaging the practice of a/r/tography—the integrated practice of art, research and education—with a sacred aesthetic of ritual can bring us closer to the ancient mysteries that mystic educator Rudolf Steiner (1964) wrote of:

The Mysteries which fostered that unity [a consciousness of the common source of art, religion and science] were a kind of combination art institute, church and school. For what they offered was not a one-sided sole dependence upon language. The words uttered by the initiate as both cognition and spiritual revelation were supported and illustrated by the sacred rituals unfolding, before listening spectators, in mighty pictures. (p.83)

Through a sacred pedagogical practice (Lincoln & Denzin, 2005), we may counteract the alienation and fragmentation of a world that is "suffering from its loss of center" and assist in the development of a new age that the late Kenneth Beittel (1989) passionately articulated:

The practice of art as seen here is a spiritual discipline that offers a powerful antidote to an age of suffering from its loss of center...In this coming age we will see a big shift in human consciousness, away from the mental, egoistic, toward more spiritual ways of being and knowing...to practice thus is to work at self-transformation: a transformation of one's entire being-not by increments, but by a quantum leap. This is art for a new age. (p.ix)

Although rarely articulated by artists working with community or on their own, emergent ritual as a spiritual discipline has much to offer the practice of a/r/tography.

A/r/tography is the interdisciplinary location from which I have begun to articulate and find support and inspiration for the sacred and relational aesthetic elements of an art practice that is community-based, educative and transformative. It is a practice that is alert to intersubjective awareness and an awakening of consciousness that is not dependent on transmission of knowledge alone. Mary Richards (1962/86), a potter, mystic, and teacher, makes the important distinction between knowledge and consciousness.

[K]nowledge and consciousness are two quite different things. Knowledge is like a product we consume and store...By consciousness I mean a state of being "awake" to the world through our organism. This kind of consciousness requires...an organism attuned to the finest perceptions and responses...When knowledge is transformed into consciousness and into will, ah then we are on the high road indeed... (pp.15-16)

A/r/tography as ritual offers the structure to combine intuitive relational art-practices with qualitative research. Arts-based practices and research can assist in the expansion of society's understanding of itself by extending knowledge into consciousness.

Practicing A/r/tography as Ritual

[I]ngrained in modern social interaction and political performance; ritual is not compatible with industrial speed; to perform a ritual one must slow down. (Trinh Minh-ha, 2005, p.99)

Trinh's words offer essential advice for those interested in practicing a/r/tography as ritual. The pace at which the world of academia operates has become similar to industrial speed driven by corporate production and consumerism. A/r/tography as ritual takes us out of the normal confines of linear time and space and transports us into altered spaces where intuition leads us, the cosmos witnesses us, and where the sacred is valued and engaged. A/r/tography as ritual has parameters that permit us to enter time-free states of unknowing, and to return when decide to a rational discourse of knowing. New understandings of consciousness gained through a/r/tographic research are limited if they cannot be translated back into the language familiar to others. But first we must slow down and take time to enter ritual space.

Becoming familiar with a/r/tography as ritual as an individual is an important first step before undertaking a/r/tography as ritual with others. To come to a personal understanding of emergent ritual, a/r/tographers must begin to reflect on our creative processes and look for signs of the four elements of emergent ritual within: 1) intention, 2) sacred space, 3) witnessing and 4) closure. Once we begin to recognize these elements in our creative process, we must attend to aspects that may be missing and begin to practice them with conscious awareness. As the ritual container for entering the unknown is consciously created and worked within over time, self trust will inevitably begin to grow. Practicing a/r/tography as ritual with a solid sense of trust in the self can contribute to work that stretches individual limits and moves towards a greater depth of understanding.

Once we become practiced and confident with a/r/tography as ritual individually, we next need to extend the practice into working with community. This may mean reflecting anew upon previous work done with community. Moreover, it is necessary to find the places where we have already been utilizing elements of ritual and notice the elements that may be missing in our community practice. Practicing a/r/tography as ritual with others is a risk that may venture to places of conflict and misunderstandings. Yet it is within the practice that there is an opportunity to move through the differences to mutual acceptance, respect, and—at times—transformation of the differences.

Acting with awareness and reverence for the sacred within a practice of a/r/tography as ritual assists in gathering community together in a way that is transformative, non-traditional, and emancipatory; it challenges oppressive societal structures. Through sharing my experience of a sacred relational aesthetic of art making and ritual in the *Sisters* project, I have demonstrated a story; a sacred way to bring community together through art—questioning oppressive ways of artistically representing and being with each other. Within the *Sisters* project, we encountered the lived experience of singular plurality, individually witnessed and witnessing within the larger context of witnessed and witnessing women.

A/r/tography as ritual results in the combination of years of developing ritual in an art practice with the educational arts-based inquiry of a/r/tography (Bickel 2004, 2005). A/r/tography as ritual assists in bringing forward what I experience as the liminal (Sameshima & Irwin, 2006), spiritual world of the ancient mysteries. It is through the interrelational dance of the three identities of artist/researcher/educator partnered with the institutional realms of art/science/religion that the gift of sacred

aesthetic art has the opportunity to express itself most powerfully in the world. The work of an "initiate" who chooses to practice a/r/tography as ritual within community will be to bring forth the relational and sacred aesthetic of art and education into greater visibility and practice—within the academy, the art community, and the world.

NOTES

- ¹ Transformative learning (i.e. Meizerow, 2000; O'Sullivan, 1999; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003; Vella, 2000) has been theorized by numerous adult educators. For my use of the term, I draw from the work of adult educators Elisabeth Tisdell and Denise Tolliver. They, in turn, draw from and extend the transformational learning theory as mapped out by Meizerow and O'Sullivan, which they find limited in its individual psychological focus. They combine the work of religious and sociological scholar David Abalos (1998), whose community-based, social justice work extends beyond personal transformation as focus, to societal transformation. It is within the combined personal and societal understanding of transformative learning that I work.
- ² Dwayne Rourke lived in Bragg Creek, Alberta at the time.
- ³ Poet Jan Sheppard collaborated on this project with me. As each art piece was completed, she interviewed myself and each woman, and followed by writing a poem that reflected upon both the woman's experience and the art itself. The poems were displayed on the wall beside each art piece in the galleries where they were exhibited (The Centre Gallery & Art is Vital Gallery in Calgary, Alberta & the Richmond Art Gallery in Richmond, British Columbia). We also self-published a limited edition of hand-bound books of the art images and poetry. (See Bickel & Sheppard (1995). The art and poetry of sisters. Calgary, AB: In Search of Fearlessness Press). For the purpose of this essay, I will not focus on this part of the collaborative project.
- ⁴ Each woman chose a pose they wanted themselves to be represented in for the drawing. I invited them to bring an object that represented sisterhood for them, and a shawl or piece of fabric that they could drape however they liked on their body. They would be naked under the shawl but could choose how much their bodies were covered or not. Some chose to be fully draped and others sat or lay on their shawl.
- ⁵ There was a wide age distribution amongst the co-creators: the young girls included my 11 and 13 year old stepdaughters, a 6 month old baby, and a 5 year old neighbour. The oldest participant was 62 years old. For the sake of flow in the writing I will call them all women.
- ⁶ Twenty-two of the twenty-nine women were able to be part of this co-created performance ritual.
- ⁷ Apophatic is known as the *via negativa* form of theology where one knows through unknowing. (Shantz, 1999, p.65).
- ⁸ Through choosing to consciously witness the person that I am in co-creation with (rather than experience them as an object to be rendered for my own artistic and aesthetic ends), I have come to hold reverence for the role of art and testimony as theorized by Felman and Laub (1992). They wrote of art as inscribing or artistically bearing witness to "what we do not yet know of our historical relation to events of our times" (p.xx) and suggests, like the philosopher Levinas, that the artist as witness gives testimony to "the vehicle of an occurrence" (p.3) that is a reality beyond the artist herself.
- ⁹ My writing practice is also fed by a relational aesthetic. I would like to acknowledge here the gift of critical and supportive conversation and editing that my partner, R. Michael Fisher, and Rita Irwin have contributed to this essay.
- ¹⁰ In my master's thesis (Bickel, 2004), I addressed the practice of collaboration in art and found four different levels of collaborative involvement that I have experienced in art projects. Developing a working relationship of vulnerability, honesty, mutual respect, and trust that is willing to address differences and power relations is key to successful collaboration. If you want to know more about these levels, the thesis can be accessed on line at barbarabickel.com.

- ¹¹ As an artist, I distinguish between the term performance ritual and the term performance art as the aspect of sacred intention through ritual is essential to my practice and is often not present in contemporary performance art.
- ¹² An altar is a small table placed in the centre of a ritual with objects of offering placed upon it.
- ¹³ For those interested in an analogous process that includes a social therapeutic aspect of ritual inquiry, see Bickel and Fisher (2006), which synthesizes the four moments of *currere* (e.g. Pinar & Grumet) and the art of qualitative thinking (e.g. Beittel).
- ¹⁴ Hongyu Wong (2005) wrote of wounds and the source of creativity they inspire in curricular meaning-making.
- ¹⁵ The question of ethics emerged for me again in the writing of this essay where my view as the artist is written without the input of my co-creators. I acknowledge that my writing reflects my story and may not accurately reflect theirs. In particular, acknowledging the names of my co-creators in the two art images felt important yet was crossing an ethical line of appropriating their experiences into mine. I have addressed this by sharing the essay with the two co-creators and inviting their responses to the writing that reflects my experience and have made changes where they have felt needed to best honour them.
- ¹⁶ I draw understanding of the term *arational* from the Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser (1984). The *arational* includes mystical states, intuition, body knowledge, and emotions and is often accessed through the making of art and ritual. It includes the rational and irrational in its embrace.

A/R/TOGRAPHY: RESONATION IN WRITING

The a/r/tographer develops an aesthetic interaction with the world, an artistry of words, living inquiry, and teaching, and simultaneously develops a community of relationships around that aesthetic. My a/r/tographic story is one of poetry: I write poetry in that same compulsive way that I bite my fingernails. Spontaneity rules, and yet so much of my poetry comes back to classroom teaching; even though I write from chance and in those unforeseen moments, my poetry often explores the idea of creating transformative memories in the classroom.

Despite their apparent obscurity, my poems are an attempt to linger on the artistic moment that can bring self and other together, whether on the beach or in writing with students. Often that moment appears common place, but every art depends on nuance details and lingering spirit. When poems inquire into these moments and develop them as moments of significance, those lingerings often hold more transforming energy. The beauty is in the motion of picking up the moments while all around the classroom events continue to unfold.

For half my life now I have worked with student writers: writers of all ages, talents, and interests. The most consistent thing I have done over the years is teach writing to writers, not to students. Students often find it difficult to make the leap from student to writer—often the only impediment to writing well is belief in the identity of being a writer. Students wonder whether they are real writers, whether they will become writers, whether their writing is any good, and by extension, whether they are any good.

Once self-identified as a writer, a student can carry with her the commitment and care of writing practice, that tireless scrutiny and rumination of the world around her. This commitment carries over to one's sense of self, even to confidence as a human being, and to a resonance in writing that is artistry in craft, but also artistry in an aesthetic living. As a teacher, I have influence on how and whether a writing identity is taken on. For adolescents in particular, the notion of being is in flux and one's identity can be discovered, even given, right in the classroom community. For writing teachers, this is why the classroom needs to become a writing community. Creating that community is not a complicated science, but it does require an amazing openness of heart. From that place of openness, writers can take real writing risks (however momentary) and from these moments when writers are being writers with one another, a writing community emerges right in the classroom. This is where I like to linger in my teaching: it is where the energy lies. And it is why, I suppose, that I now call myself an a/r/tographer: the name has been given to me, though it is clear I have been an a/r/tographer from the very beginning.

In thinking of David Jardine and Sharon Friesen's (2006) paper on *The*