

The Graduate School of Education  
at The University of Melbourne present

# UNESCO Observatory Multi-Disciplinary Journal in the Arts

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SPECIAL ISSUE

## A/r/tography and the Visual Arts

Volume 3 | Issue 1 | 2013

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Guest Editors

*Rita L. Irwin*  
*Anita Sinner*

Editor

Associate Editor  
Designer

*Lindy Joubert*

*Naomi Berman*  
*Rosie Ren*

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## ABOUT THE E-JOURNAL

*The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is based within the Graduate School of Education at The University of Melbourne, Australia. The journal promotes multi-disciplinary research in the Arts and Education and arose out of a recognised need for knowledge sharing in the field. The publication of diverse arts and cultural experiences within a multi-disciplinary context informs the development of future initiatives in this expanding field. There are many instances where the arts work successfully in collaboration with formerly non-traditional partners such as the sciences and health care, and this peer-reviewed journal aims to publish examples of excellence.*

*Valuable contributions from international researchers are providing evidence of the impact of the arts on individuals, groups and organisations across all sectors of society. The UNESCO Observatory refereed e-journal is a clearing house of research which can be used to support advocacy processes; to improve practice; influence policy making, and benefit the integration of the arts in formal and non-formal educational systems across communities, regions and countries.*

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# Special Issue: A/r/tography and the Arts

## Guest Editors

*Rita L. Irwin | Anita Sinner*

### THEME

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through an ongoing process of art making in any art form and writing not separate or illustrative of each other but interconnected and woven through each other to create relational and/or enhanced meanings. A/r/tographical work are often rendered through the methodological concepts of contiguity, living inquiry, openings, metaphor/metonymy, reverberations and excess, which are enacted and presented/performed when a relational aesthetic inquiry condition is envisioned as embodied understandings and exchanges between art and text, and between and among the broadly conceived identities of artist/researcher/teacher. A/r/tography is inherently about self as artist/researcher/teacher yet it is also social when groups or communities of a/r/tographers come together to engage in shared inquiries, act as critical friends, articulate an evolution of research questions, and present their collective evocative/provocative works to others (see <http://m1.cust.educ.ubc.ca/Artography/>).

This special issue of Multi-Disciplinary Research in the Arts invites original creative and scholarly inquiry that engages in critical debates and issues regarding a/r/tographical methodologies; are exemplars of critical approaches to a/r/tographical research; and/or extend the boundaries of inquiry-based research. Contributions are welcome from disciplines across the arts, humanities and social sciences and in a wide range of formats including articles, essays, and artistic interludes, which explore diverse forms of the arts from drama, dance, poetry, narrative, music, visual arts, digital media and more.

# Smelly Ontology in A/r/tography: The Agency of Decay

**Patti Pente PhD**  
*University of Alberta*

## ABSTRACT

The agency within the concept of decay demonstrates forms of art education that move beyond narrow, visual regimes of signification (Nancy, 2010). Through an a/r/tographical examination of the nature of finitude and subjectivity, and drawing upon Jean-Luc Nancy's (1991, 2000) ontology of becoming and the inoperative community, I consider, through a reframing of landscape art practices, potential agency that is guided by decay. Within the current conservative educational climate focussed upon accountability, I contemplate the extent to which artist/researcher/educators might shift understanding of curricula from residual skill-based nodes of self-expression and personal meaning-making to sites of sensual rationality and aesthetic/political exploration; thereby shifting the Cartesian subject toward a *becoming* of the a/r/tographer.

## KEYWORDS

*Art, A/r/tography, Education, Jean-Luc Nancy, Philosophy, Agency, Subjectivity*

## SMELLY ONTOLOGY IN A/R/TOGRAPHY: AGENCY OF DECAY

Imagine the various imperceptible, relentless processes of transformation within decay. Each slightly different shade of mottled, eaten colour implies so much that is beyond the limit of sight, on an invisible, molecular scale. Decay is insistent in the way that cells quietly break down and up until the moment that rot dries and becomes translated into another life, the smell of finitude is a pungent signifier of limits and also of agency: limits that are redefined within finality, and agency that is as fleeting as subjectivity itself.

It is within this environment of ontological inquiry that this writing queries how a/r/tography can move us to think life through the lens of shared encounters, socially responsible actions, and affectively powerful events. Through a/r/tography, this paper, on one level about reinterpreting landscape art and one's sense of local and global place, braids in three parts: a framework of finitude and agency within an ontological discussion of subjectivity; an example of an art project through which these theories are materialized; and a discussion of the effects of considering forms of educational, institutional practices as cultural moments of political agency.

## METHODOLOGY

For the purposes of this inquiry I consider a/r/tography as a methodology of the a/r/tographer's nose. Within this biological signifier there suggests the distinctively embodied quality of creative method that is inspired by a sense of smell. As a relatively recent development within qualitative research, a/r/tography has moved into all areas of the arts. However, as a visual artist, I begin within the limits of landscape art and sense of place that are translated locally and globally, using technologies that vary from sable hair to pixel. I do this with the realization that each tool shapes the research is particular, idiosyncratic ways.

A/r/tography moves and lives within the slash ( / ). It is in the slash of a/r/tography that the multiple, temporal iterations of the inquiring subject become in a tenuous presence: immediately the appearance and disappearance play in a tension of

ontological issue as the sequencing of self emerges. In this writing I consider a/r/tography as fugitive methodology: that it is elusive; that it has already disappeared. What is left is a trace of what a humanist perspective would call experience, and it is the trace of the relationship between presence and absence that interests me. I examine the a/r/tographical subject lost and found in the (/).

If the slash is a marker of connected spaces, yet also a division of two adjacent placeholders, I mis/place my work and re/search within the inevitable tensions that arise. The desire to investigate the paradoxes within my topic results in the momentum of forming and answering research questions. Gilles Deleuze notes that it is paradox that is the mainstay of philosophy, and that various kinds of paradox occur. He comments, 'Paradox is the pathos or the passion of philosophy', (Deleuze, 1997: 227). There are personal contradictions within the self that instigate lines of investigation that trouble paradox within the research topic, and in the process, they reveal the paradoxes within the a/r/tographer.

*"Fungus"*  
mixed media by  
Patti Pente  
Author

Photo credit:  
Monica Emme



## AN EXPERIMENT INTO SENSE OF PLACE

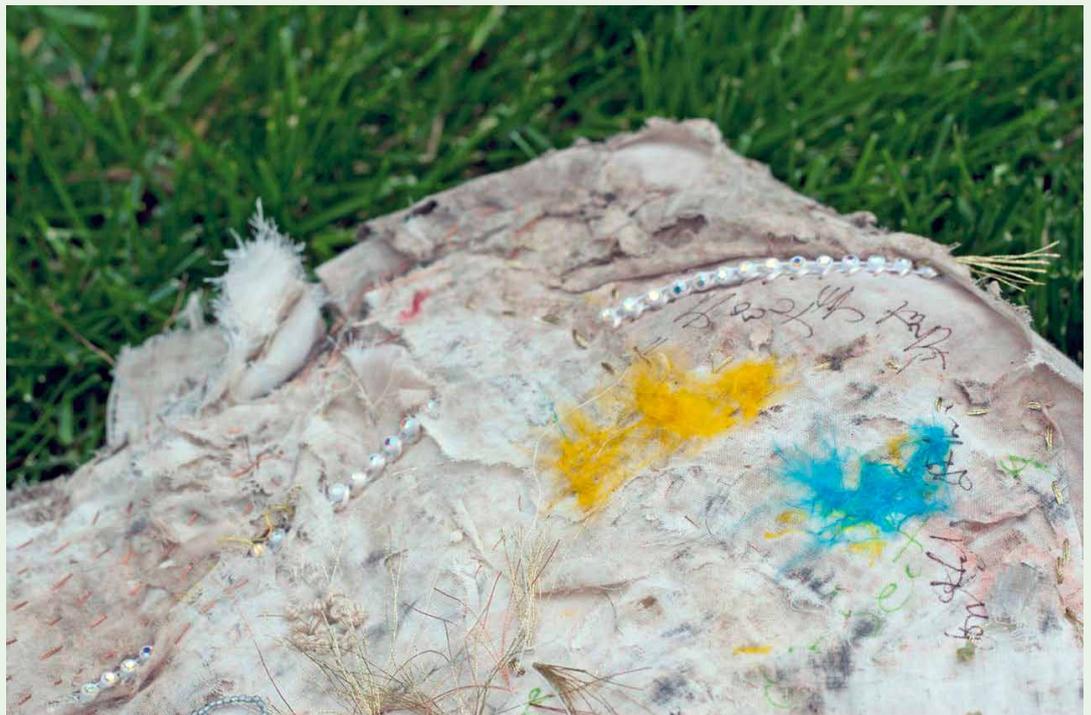
I am carefully unfolding a piece of cloth that I asked artist, Pat Beaton, to leave in a place of personal significance as part of a larger a/r/tographical inquiry into a critique of education through the creation of landscape art. Beaton buried the piece under her composter in a local community garden. During the last of a series of three meetings where artistic practice, learning, and community were discussed, we go to the garden and dig the fabric out of the earth. It really stinks. I am reminded that such reactions to smells are personal: never truly shared experiences. With thumb and index finger, I gingerly pull at the corners. The material is mouldy and

the strength of these various spores that have nestled into the cotton over six weeks have left a legacy of blue, red, yellow, pink, and brown marks in various shades. But it is the invisible smell that is overwhelming. This circulation of decay that I smell in the air around me is a visceral reminder of existential limits. I pause.

There is a link between this primeval smell of decay and the political necessity of agency in art education. In this case, agency is born in the disruption of the norms of landscape art through the burial of fabric and subsequent creation of landscape art called, 'Fungus', that I made from the decayed remains of the cloth. Through disruption, other possible configurations of art, life, and education gain potential. This kind of potential within art education, once it is extracted from the formalist skeleton of elements and principles of art, can embrace art as shared encounters. Students can consider art making as a form of socially responsible action. This takes art found both in and out of schools toward affectively powerful events. In other words, disruption of the status quo in art education, as in all aspects of life is key to questioning the ways we live together in this world. It can lead to inequities identified and to positive social change, thus the potential transformation of our lives. This landscape art remains in the shape of a quilter's square, as a nod to Beaton's experience and to the physical site of the garden, yet the additions in thread, bead, wire, and other textures rupture the quilter's organization, as the smells directed me to follow the marks of fungal growth. Guided by the unexpected sensory surprise of odour, I consider this kind of potential through artistic process, all overseen by the ontological inquiry into contemporary life.

*"Fungus" detail  
mixed media by  
Patti Pente  
Author*

*Photo Credit:  
Monica Emme*



## FINITUDE:

The ramifications of expanding from a modernist, humanist subject position, manifest in education through discussions of individuality, intentionality, and self-reflection, to encompass a more flexible notion of existence that is signified by

motion and emergence, are significant. Our Western inheritance from Cartesian philosophy includes the rational, thinking subject who seeks a foundation of absolute truth and knowledge. Accordingly, logical deduction is to be valued over sensory perception. However, as my work suggests, there is more to investigate within the sensory, concrete, and corporeal realm. I enter into one such expansion by beginning at the perceived end: with finitude. As a liberating sense of limitation, finitude has threaded through complex, philosophical ruminations throughout history. Ultimately, finitude means death, the physical ending of our being in this world in a literal and material sense. But finitude as this ultimate border, what Bauman (2006: 42) calls an absolute alterity as 'the total absolute unknowability', opens the question of what is beyond death, and here philosophy becomes immersed in a praxis that critiques social conditions and the nature of corporeal conditions of life. In this way, finitude stretches the limits of immanence to the realization that we create our worlds alone and together (Hutchens, 2005). As Jean-Luc Nancy notes, finitude is our ability to 'access the whole of the origin' (2000, p. 15). But Nancy goes further, troubling this notion of the whole:

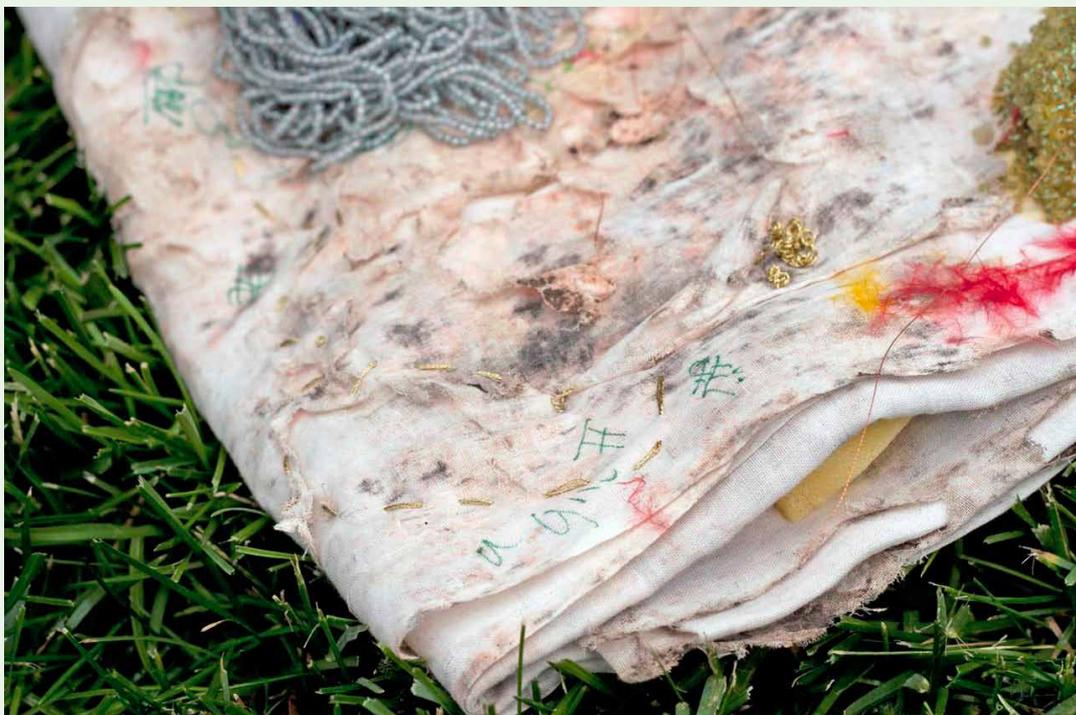
*'Finitude' signifies the infinite singularity of meaning, the infinite singularity of access to truth. Finitude is the origin; that is, it is an infinity of origins. 'Origin' does not signify that from which the world comes, but rather the coming of each presence of the world, each time singular. (Nancy, 2000: 15, italics in original).*

Finitude, for Nancy, is a singular moment that each time, within each relationship, is the making of meaning through the concrete, embodied encounter with another (Hutchens, 2005). The numerous exposures of singularity that are infinite in their multiplicity are available to us because of this notion of finitude as a concrete, material existence in the world. We are born and we die. This we already share. This is all we existentially share (Hutchens, 2005; James, 2006; Nancy, 2000).

This concept of finitude, dissected from religion, is intricately tied to the political and here is where I find purchase. Nancy makes the connection between finitude and freedom as a form of agency that is part of existence. Accordingly, we, as thoughtful, social beings, hold potential for action because of our recognition of finitude: that all we have is life, lived among others. Nancy recognizes that existence, however, does not hold intentionality, something that is often assumed within the autonomous, liberal subject (Nancy, 2000). I am startled to recognize shades of Nancy's thoughts on finitude in the moment of the simple act of smelling decaying cloth dug up from the earth. As I work every olfactory detail back into the fabric as landscape art, sight is guided by scent as I cut, fold, and stitch the odours wafting up from the unearthed fabric.

'Fungus' detail  
mixed media by  
Patti Pente

Photo Credit:  
Monica Emme



## DECAY AS CURRICULAR GUIDE

I attempt the new and unfamiliar through the creation of smelly cloth as landscape art, inspired by the sharing of ideas and creative gestures with another artist. Within this uncertain process, stitching the odours into fabric, the cloth falls apart in my thickening fingers: there is encouragement within this refuse as a recurring reminder of the power within death to recycle into life, as the cloth fibres drift into the garden soil, richly engorged with entropic bits. These fungi silently rotting the discoloured cloth have potential as a curricular guide. Learning is filled with similar disorderly moments when groups of a/r/tographers find opportunities to make pedagogical sense through creative endeavours. Just as odour is invisible and uncontainable, so too are the unofficial aspects of curricula that reside in attitude, emotion, sensation, and relation. This rotten fabric is a strong reminder of living in the immediate moments of embodiment; as these hidden aspects of curriculum are reminders that the 'lived curriculum', as Aoki (2005) describes it, holds learning opportunities and actualities. It is within the relationships among the students and teachers that this lived curriculum is played out.

Bergman et al. (2009: 148) describe similar creative, relational aspects within this approach to education in the simile,

'school as art...is based on the premise that the activities that take place in a school – experimentation, scholarship, research, discussion, criticism, collaboration, friendship - are continuous processes of redefining and seeking out the potential in practice and theory at a given point in time. ...[It] is not only a site of learning, but a space of cultural production...that is *triggered* (as opposed to located at) acts of generosity and exchange' (italics in original).

A form of agency opens in this consideration of finitude and uncertainty. By rethinking curriculum as uncertain relational presence, embodied creative actions as moments of agency are highlighted.

In contemporary North America, educators are reconsidering the effectiveness of the competitive atmosphere, and the pressures of accountability and teacher accreditation in search for more equitable environments (Apple, 2003, 2010). As Diane Ravitch cautions, 'What is tested may ultimately be less important than what is untested, such as a student's ability to seek alternative explanations, to raise questions, to pursue knowledge on his own, and to think differently' (2010: 226). Schools shy from conditions of uncertainty through the linear structuring of accountability measures that are a result of neo-liberal and neo-conservative social pressures (Apple, 2003; Beane and Apple, 2007). The pressures on children to perform according to narrow structures that lend accountability to schools are well documented (Apple, 2003; Carr, 2008; Gandin & Apple, 2004; Kovacs, 2009; Smith, 2006). One unfortunate result of this accountability is increased pressure on students to compete and aim for perfection (Smith, 2006).

While parents and students, caught up in the normative demand for grades, assessment and benchmarking, demand categorization and documentation of learning in schools, there needs to be more room for alternative activities that support what Apple (2003: 19) calls, 'thick democracy', where the educational environment is less prescriptive and more holistically participatory and inclusive. This can be supported through artistic practises with a similar spirit of 'Fungus': practices that acknowledge the finite human condition of fragmentary or limited knowledge in which uncertainty is the norm. It is in this kind of recognition that the relationships among us can be highlighted and this, I argue, is a political gesture of great importance. It is important for two reasons. First, children need learning opportunities to recognize their responsibility for their shared world. As educators, we can move the focus in education toward the ways that we relate to one another within our communities, acknowledging that understanding of self is contingent on understanding others, and that this understanding is always partial and changing. I believe that we can create schools where awareness and acceptance of differences can become commonplace through such understandings. Second, sensual moments of agency that can occur within embodied, aesthetic encounters with materials of art-making processes are such openings that offer powerful learning opportunities to advocate and consider one's place in this world. Decay, considered as a "being-with" of subjectivity that Nancy (2000) notes is the important 'lesson' on a kind of existential exposure to one another, can be paralleled to the fragility of our lives together; the fragility of these decayed fragments of cloth that have the feathery consistency of unworkable community. Thus, Nancy shows us an opportunity for curriculum through his consideration of the inoperative community: can the 'inoperative' school lead toward a more democratic environment through an agency of decay? In other words, can it lead to an acknowledgement that our being-with is contingent on the decay of existential exposure? Decay suggests a connection to the earth and to life that is like the a/r/tographical slash of the in between: fleeting and fragmentary, but powerful in its residual effects.

## COMMUNITY GARDEN AS 'UNWORKABLE' EDUCATIONAL GROUND

Pat Beaton's encounters within community art take me into practical as well as philosophical means for considering alternative subject positions as suggested by Nancy. It is a challenge, however, as I struggle with shifting my ingrained assumptions and values about artist, researcher, and teacher in community: about community itself. The community garden is one manifestation of Nancy's inoperative community (1991). He theorizes and cautions against the solidification of identity as a unified whole as opposed to a more flexible subject of mutable, relational parts. A community that is unworkable or inoperative involves Nancy's critique of the neoliberal subject position that infiltrates all areas of society, including education (Apple, 2003). By neoliberal, I refer to the promotion of economic policies that support global capitalism, such as free trade, privatization, and limited government intervention. Specifically, I connect the liberal subject with the individual who is competitive, and managerial in nature. Nancy suggests, through the inoperative community, that western society requires an alternative kind of relationship that does not rely on the individual working to form a community based upon group needs or desires, but rather, is based upon the notion of the subject as already in a form of plurality by nature of existence – already exposed to another and thus mutable through personal encounters (Hutchens, 2005; James, 2006; Nancy, 1991).

The community garden of Beaton's selection for the burial of the cloth is one metaphor and example of what an unworkable community might mean. In the garden, divided into a series of plots, various people come together diachronically, to plant according to individual desires. The locality of the site and gardening are the elements that bind the community loosely together. No other signifiers are available that create and solidify this un/working group. Cultural exchanges of knowledge instigated by a common interest in the growing of plants are frequently part of the life of this un/community. It is in this kind of local, temporal community of relative strangers that the potential for cultural understanding and appreciation can and does, in this case, occur.

As a member of this loosely formed community, the garden site for the placement of fabric holds significance for Beaton. As I have recounted, Beaton folded the piece of fabric very neatly into a square that she then placed under her homemade composter in the shared plot of land at the centre of her urban life. I distinctly remember the event of retrieving the piece:

*It is loud in this garden. The cars roar by on asphalt that surrounds this oasis of green. After the six weeks, Beaton searches carefully for indications of decay, mould, and earthen evidence of finitude in the cloth. Her interest is peaked in the privileging of decay in the debris that we toss away. Here she reaffirms her values about being in the world in a very physical and immediate way. As we unfold a few of the layers, bugs scurry away from our intrusion. A small woodlice and a tiny centipede escape from the folds as they feel the sunlight. We expose layer after layer, unfolding slowly and tentatively, both of us jolting away from the cloth repeatedly as the smell of decay assails our noses. Pat searches for evidence of grid shapes, the quilt-maker in her seeking familiar pattern.*

*This experience of cloth cleanly folded and then unfolded into smells of death as the material disintegrates and falls from our fingers back into the cut square of soil surprises me, although I thought I had anticipated this occurrence. The cloth has the fragility of a dragonfly wing. Part of it remains at the site and becomes the soil for the next season of growth. I am startled by the speed of disintegration and the strength of these fungi.*

*I think about the ideas of finitude, sharing, and community as I remember these rotting threads floating into the earth. This place of urban/rural threshold calls out as it slips in its scale. I look to the street; I look down to my feet. A hole for cloth, a dead and growing place surrounded by a living city: infinity within this singular, material encounter of cloth, artist, and land.*

The threshold of learning is entangled in sharing with an acute awareness of difference, and this is where the threads settle. I think of the singular space between one and another and I imagine it layered onto text, coloured and ephemeral like a new-age aura. But the space of meaning has no physical form and does not take up a traversable kind of distance. I reach out and keep reaching.

On one level, Beaton's cloth is a marker for ways that she values the acts and moments of a community that is flexible, and that evolves from the shared places of gardening. A kind of community that Agamben (1993: 86) describes as an intolerable act:

*'What the state cannot tolerate in any way, however, is that the singularities form a community without affirming an identity, that humans co-belong without any representable condition of belonging.' Beaton calls the garden the perfect example of successful community art.*

*As a creative place I still say the community gardens are THE community art project: ...they are probably the most successful examples of community development, and [of] creating intersections where people can meet each other who wouldn't normally meet each other... The creativity that goes into each garden plot down there. ... It completely gets transformed over a year and will completely get transformed again in the next year - it's very active and it's huge with cultural meaning because people are growing things that they miss from their countries. Ms. Beaton, 2007 pers. comm.*

There is often a disconnection between institutions such as schools, which are firmly located within humanism, and some forms of contemporary artist practice within communities. The landscape art that I create as a response to Pat Beaton's placement of fabric in this inoperative community garden reshapes traditions of the Western landscape genre that is structured upon pastoral representations of the land. It is significant that the nature of this shared garden slides in signification among concepts of contemporary community art, inoperative community, cultural sharing, and agency.

## AGENCY WITHIN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

I contemplate the nature of this kind of unnamed co-belonging and the event of mobile, flexible learning that can emerge from the inoperative community. There is a kind of agency within these moments of connection that is fleeting yet powerful

in that the singular moment shapes the subject in what Nancy describes as ‘exposure’ to another (2000). There is a kind of vulnerability suggested in such language that is a reminder of the ways that the embodied subject shares finitude: art practices can instigate clarity about our dependence upon each other. Art reassembles the viewer and artist in a shared awareness of the limits of our fragile bodies. In such an instance, I, as teacher, *become* a/r/tographer through an artistic performance within the context of my classroom.

Performance by  
Patti Pente

Photo Credit:  
Nicole Galellis



*I greet my undergraduate teacher education class. The focus of this class is on performance and video art practices. I am acutely aware that I will, with my decision to do a performance, experience a kind of vulnerability that only a sensual, corporeal act can expose. I attempt to create a singular instance of becoming-with (Nancy, 2000). I know that my body will be open in ways that are far from professorial. I sit at a desk in front of the group. Within reach is a wooden bowl of round stones of medium size, a glass of water, and a two-page script of poetic contemplation on the nature of teaching in lecture format. I begin to read from my script, and proceed to place stones into my mouth, one by one, until my chin and shirt are wet with saliva; until my words are unintelligible; until I am at the edge of gagging. I finally split the stones back into the bowl and take a sip of water. I begin again.*

*I anticipate continuing this uncomfortable performance until one of the students asks me to stop. I expect to continue for about fifteen minutes. It is over an hour later that I am asked to stop the performance. In that time one student has left, and all have variously engaged and disengaged through eye contact. Through the following discussion that covers vulnerability, power structures, appropriateness of my performance and so on, my jaw, lips, and gums ache. It was a powerful moment for me and for various students within the group. In hindsight, I see how erratic and fragile the opening can be toward an a/r/tographical becoming.*

In schools, this kind of learning that is in excess of set curricula is very satisfying, even thrilling for teachers. It can also be very unnerving, as it can situate teachers beyond their set plans, curricula, and comfort zones. Here the slashes of a/r/tography vibrate and are felt with acuity in the educational “moment”: as continually fleeting moments of educational agency. This trace of the slash is *becoming a/r/tographer*. It is significant, yet, this kind of unanticipated learning relationship among teachers and students that many have experienced is often hidden or unnoticed, and consequently absent from the category of being called educationally valuable. Similarly, this kind of learning event is frequently inherent in art that is restless; that presses openings into the social fabric, at times inviting the viewer to poke her head right through to question what she assumes is valuable.

The repeated encounters and exchanges of information and emotion that are different each and every time between and among others can be visualized as a series of social ruptures of the status quo of closed communities that form the strata of life. Rupture suggests rapid change. Yet, decay, as a form of rupture, implies a tempo of imperceptible slowness. Here is a quality of decay that adds to its strength as a form of agency: the minutia of slow, atomic decay allows for a concentrated awareness of its importance: something that speed does not encourage. The slow change of decay is constant and inevitable, as is Nancy’s exposure to another in the becoming of being-with. The variety of temporal and transitory sharing of lives is a form of agency that can result in a powerful residual effect: a great empathy for different people that is surprisingly affirmative in its accumulation. I smile as I breathe in how this all makes sense: but obliquely, seeping into my body slowly with each fold, smell, and stitch of cloth. Community garden as educational ground for rethinking the slippages necessary for unworkable community to be inclusive: the fault lines of belonging must be made available to all. This is the socially just limit to which I, as a/r/tographer, continue to reach: to take the curricular risk within artistic practice.

The implications for practice in schools rest in the opening for multiple voices to be heard and more importantly, to be listened to: art activities that support uncertain and multiple endings offer the unexpected, and this is an opportunity where teachers and students may explore their many ideas, and share different opinions without fear of ridicule. This parallels the complexity that a successful democracy demands: furthermore, we cannot assume democracy holds the same meaning and expectations for all parties but, rather, that there exists a contentiousness and density surrounding notions of democracy that must be unpacked (Apple. 2010). Nancy (2000) shows us, through his notions of the unworkability of community that it, like democracy, is complicated, emergent and vibrant, but that the significance of community rests within the exposure of one to another that results from a sharing of vulnerabilities. The unexpected slippages that can occur through artistic openings are key.

I think about this and about the various substantial *and* emergent communities to which I belong, and to Nancy’s theoretical dismantling of these belongings. I understand it unevenly. Am I really capable of imagining an alternative kind of togetherness? One that does not depend upon my being a substantial identity – instead, being a threshold between singular and plural, always in a moving recognition toward another but never becoming the other: created each time meaning is made from acknowledging difference. I seek to internalize this exposure of the threshold between the plurality of community and singularity. Nancy notes, “One must neither

return to oneself, nor come to oneself. You must not ‘become what you are’: you must become...the becoming, or that which you become” (in Hallward 2003: 50). As I recognize the magnitude of this theoretical hurdle, the challenge facing our institutions to do the same becomes daunting. Can the institution recognize itself as unsignifiable gathering of threshold moments of relationality? Does the singular/plural tension/thresholds/borders within Nancy’s suggestions of community even apply to an institution, or are we too entrenched in a neoliberal, modernist project? These questions continue to haunt my a/r/tographical inquiries.

There are interruptions within the homogeneity of institutional functionality that open spaces where this kind of community based upon a vulnerable exposure to another emerges, kind of like little social volcanoes, erupting and softening educational ground before crusting over once again: much like the garden plot is renewed each year. Not surprisingly, these learning opportunities are often located in the personal spaces of art, narrative, and poetry; created, spoken, and written in the first person. By acknowledging that my subjectivity rests in every exposure to/with another, I work with the power and agency of unexpected, relational encounter through creative play with materials. While acknowledging my vulnerability in this paradigm, by relinquishing perceived authority built upon the membership within what can only be described as closed communities of academic, and artistic traditions, and by moving into the lived moment of a relationship with/among others that is not limited by presuppositions, I live the communal and returnable moment of learning.

In this a/r/tographical echo of Nancy’s (1991) inoperable, unworkable community, I glimpse the reasons why I venture to instruct the institution of education with my very personal vignettes. On one level, my narrative could be interpreted as a liberal exercise of presence, (de Freitas, 2007), but alternatively, it opens the collective of the institution toward a *becoming* through relationality. Davis (2001) contends that as educators, we need to encourage more dynamic, unconstrained, yet tentative positions. Following Davis, I seek spaces where learners can focus upon their relationality and pursue interests within this place of deep inquiry. Within this curriculum as a creative, uncertain process, each artistic act becomes a singular, possible moment of theorizing alternative, communal connections. I attempt, in creating landscape art from cloth, to instruct and to learn with an awareness of this state of continual becoming. Nancy notes,

*‘Art, then, makes us feel. What? A certain formation of the contemporary world... What does ‘world’ mean? ‘World’ means a certain possibility of meaning, of circulation of meaning... The meaning I’m talking about is the meaning that art shapes, the meaning that allows for a circulation of recognitions, identifications, feelings, but without fixing them in a final signification. Never does art say to us ‘the meaning of the world, the meaning of life, is this’... (Nancy, 2010: 92)*

Thus, the fabric becomes the exposition of ruptured, interrupted attempts to touch impossible limits of meaning and in doing so, a form of agency becomes available: agency built on the knowledge that small, transitory, communal connections with relative strangers matter. Whether within the classroom or within the broader interactions outside of the school, the un/working groups composed of potentially infinite finitudes can be understood as a loosely un/working community and this awareness is an important form of agency. Decay as agency can give us a glimpse of

what it might mean to live together in democratic complexity.

Nancy's sensual materiality is useful for a/r/tographers. He gives us a certain shaping, a certain perception of self in the world. His conceptualization of relationships and the creation of knowledge are forceful at the physical level: at the artist's level; at the researcher's level; at the teacher's level; and most importantly, at the child's level. Children sense their worlds with a powerful immediacy. If we, as their teachers, are to reach them - reach for them - we need to reach for our own impossible existential limits. As a/r/tographers with others, by considering our subjectivities as created through exposure to others, it is possible to open alternative ways of becoming in which we can *live* our institutions from different perspectives. The ethical ramifications of doing so can be felt in every space of difference we encounter. Here is a glimpse of curricular life already becoming: as a moving, open space of contingency that offers agency. It has a different smell.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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