

Chapter One

Invocation: Grounding



Image 3

Bickel, B. (2004). *Grounding*. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(mixed media drawing and paper collage on wood, 26 inch radius)

The Collage

I often collage onto the surface of old art pieces. Aesthetically, I prefer a pre-marked and

historically located surface to begin new work upon. My past collaborations with people are the ground that this thesis builds and rests upon. That said, this thesis is a solo^[1] project. Within this self-exposure is the guiding principle; exposing myself as an artist, researcher and educator through the process of art making and writing.

I approach writing as an art form and echo the structure of collage to assist the writing of this In a collage workshop syllabus (1998) I clarify my understanding of collage:

The act of collage-making I believe is akin to dreaming while awake. In this art form, elements your life, the world around you and your psyche come together. In the collage-making process these elements respond to and influence each other. We can guide the process but the outcome cannot be predetermined.

Different personal writing voices emerge and flow throughout the body of the thesis in the form journal entries, *reflective writing*, critical academic writing, poetry, transcribed trances, art images video. Different fonts and writing styles cue the alternating voices that have been collaged together. The trance text is written without grammar to capture the orally told stories as the "...printed text follows the laws of grammar, which are alien to speech" (Denzin, 1995, p.14).

In this thesis the unknown leads the inquiry. Because of its non-linear path this thesis may be difficult to read and follow at times. I invite the reader/viewer to enter it as they would a dream, shifting traditional impulse to be reading a thesis that is mastered and complete in its analysis, to reading a thesis that is in the process of analysis and emerging through the discovery of forgotten knowledge and ignorance.

I weave together the voices of theorists, writers and artists whose words and images have sense and sometimes illumination to my feminist art practice over the years. Through their ideas and theories, I have found that my art is not completely embedded and lost within the numinous and the mysterious. It can be unraveled. The patterns are revealed and articulated within a phenomenological,^[2] feminist and educative discourse.

The purpose of this research project was to critically reflect on my feminist art practice of the twelve years^[3], engaging the art itself in a new body of work to reflect back onto itself. I employed a/r/tography to engage an autoethnographic^[4] study. An a/r/tographer, (artist/researcher/teacher), as I

come to understand the term, works with the tools of art and writing (graphy), activating a collaborative relationship of inquiry between/with the artist self, the researcher self, and the teacher/educator self. I explain the term a/r/tography further in Chapter Three.

The research question that guides this study is **“What does it mean to me to have an ethical aesthetic feminist art practice?** There is a risk of narcissism in such a project. Art historian, Joanna Frueh, in her catalogue on the deliberately narcissistic art of artist Hanna Wilke wrote, “...literally and metaphorically looking at oneself,... can be a means of imagining the world differently, of coming to consciousness, of seeing oneself and life more clearly (p. 63). Historian and teacher, Christopher Lasch (1979), in his book *The Culture of Narcissism* finds that narcissists have “no interest in the future in part, [they have] so little interest in the past” (p. xvi). This research is a reflexive inquiry into my past collaborative art practice through creating art in the present. To avoid indulging in self-enclosing narcissism, this study draws knowledge from the past that can assist a new awareness for the future, both personally and for others interested in the identity expansion of the artist to a/r/tographer.

I have been privileged to take this time to engage an arts-based study through a graduate to stop and critically reflect on my art practice. In doing this I opened myself to a greater awareness of myself as an artist, and art as transformative pedagogy. In my past full-time art practice, I complete one project and immediately begin the next; limited economics denied me a self-reflective between art projects. A/r/tographically questioning my ethics and aesthetics brought my largely unarticulated pedagogy as an artist-educator^[5] to the foreground, by breaking open and revealing the gaps/resistances in my own philosophy of learning. The reluctant question that I am led to in the writing *What kind of a teacher/researcher/academic/pedagogue will I become?*

The core of my art practice has been collaborative, relational, embodied, intuitive and spiritual-based. Situated within the context of the art world, I call myself a collaborative artist. By collaborative I mean that I work with others and my art is created through participatory and relational interaction. Questions of ethics rapidly entered my art practice at the end of my art training in 1992 when I began working with models as active participants in art making. I have acknowledged them over time as co-creators, collaborators and co-researchers. Situated within the context of education, my artist context of collaboration is up for questioning, rethinking, relearning, reclarifying and redefining. I acknowledge

collaboration has many meanings. In Chapter Five I expand upon and categorize the many forms collaboration I have created art within.

My obsession as an artist (every artist has at least one) 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. The body has not been a valued location learning and knowledge creation in our western society (Cixious, 1997; Bordo, 1997; Irigaray, 1994). Through my years of creating art, based predominantly on the (re)presentation of the female body, I observed and experienced the female body as a site of transcendence (see image 4) as well as a location descent.^[6] In my 1998 project, *The Spirituality of Eroticism*, I found my collaborator and myself beyond our own personal selves, through movement and breath work, to that of archetypal ‘priestesses.’ I witnessed in the 2002 *She Knows* project, women moving beyond the dualistic gravity of immanence (as defined within pathological patriarchy^[7]) by participating in a “project of self-realization which expand into an indefinitely open future” (Warne, 2000).

(Re)presenting the female body through art for many years, I have witnessed the loss of self and the shame that women carry within their bodies, along with their strength and wisdom. Art has been my language of choice to communicate with the world about this disconnection—to trouble it and challenge it. Dwelling within this nonverbal environment and committed to giving voice to women their bodies led me to ritual^[8]. The form of ritual that I work with is not bound by religious or segregation but is a relational aesthetic between individuals and mystery. In his book, *Liberating Understanding the Transformative Power of Ritual*, Tom Driver (1997) writes that:

**Image 4**

Bickel, B. (2004). *Who will read this body? Public Performance Ritual*. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(video still, Chris Koppitz)

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 how to do it *next* time. We discover something of the world the ritual belongs to and aims to transform. (p.188)

Ritual has been a powerful location of learning in my life, from my years growing up attending church and Sunday school every week within the Lutheran church; to my solitary cleansing rituals as a child where I would sit with candlelight and burn incense in my just cleaned bedroom; to my yoga to my years of alternative community-building gatherings; to women circles, to spontaneous creation-

making circles, to family meetings with my stepdaughters and partner; to large public rituals within the Reclaiming Wiccan community; to the yearly Women and Spirituality Dialogue^[9]; to shared rites of passage with friends; to morning meditations; and to my art and art performance rituals. It is within these rich and varied ritual spaces that my awareness has been stretched and new knowledge generated.

Theodore Jennings (1997), quoted by Tom Driver supports my embodied experience of ritual, he claims that, “Ritual knowledge, ... is gained by and through the body...not by detached observation or contemplation but through action” (p.188). Drawing upon ritual as a location of expanding visions, Allison Pryer (2002), wrote:

Ritual is a catalyst for processes of innovation and creativity, and is thus generative of new knowledge. This knowledge permits change in the participant’s consciousness, thereby changing order of the world itself. Although rituals are used to transmit old cultural knowledge, by their nature, they cannot be performed the same way twice. The pedagogy of ritual is alchemical, one where visions and dreams arise in the participant/s consciousness, giving birth to new ways of being and living. (pp. 144-145)

Ritual is the container that holds the often confusing, yet ever emerging and transforming experiences findings within this research project. In Chapter Four, I bring greater awareness to the significance of through an exploration of the rituals that were part of this a/r/tographic study.

I have experienced the overlapping active roles of artist, researcher and educator to be quite challenging. *A/r/tographers*, Rita Irwin, Alex de Cossen, Stephanie Springgay and Sylvia Wilson (2003), describe a/r/tography as a fluid and dynamic method of inquiry that activates and weaves together the complex roles of artist/researcher/teacher through critical, theoretical, self-reflexive practice and art making and writing. It dwells in the liminal spaces between and within the worlds of the artist, researcher and educator. I have nourished and augmented this internal collaboration of roles through an understanding and practice of a/r/tography as ritual. Driver further describes this nourishing location of ritual:

Ritual...construct[s] alternative worlds, nourishing [itself] with imaginative visions. Different ordinary life, [it] move[s] in a kind of liminal space, at the edge of, or in the cracks between, the

mapped regions of what we like to call “the real world.” (p. 80)

The ground that holds and supports this thesis is a/r/tographical ritual. The lens of approach is feminist. Invoking the combination of these culturally powerful practices for this has allowed an opening and honouring of the self that I otherwise might not have been able to access.

Listening for Echoes

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

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

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

(This poem was spoken at the public performance ritual of Who will read this body?)

Within Silence

Exposure is the word that comes to me again and again as I reflect on the sensations that arise in body and in my mind as I write reflexively about my feminist art practice^[10]. The thesis art exposes my

body and the thesis writing is exposing my mind, and intellect, my thinking, and my emotions. forms of exposure elicit shame and fear at a core level in my being. I am coming to acknowledge that historical danger of an exposed woman runs deep in my body and in my blood. As I strive to access the wisdom of my female ancestors, the fear that has been passed on to me becomes visible in forms that I slowly coming to articulate. This study reveals the layers of shame, discomfort and fear that keep silence in place. Feminist poet, Judy Grahn (1993) in her book on metaformic theory (or how menstruation created the world) concludes the book with a shame ritual for women. She writes of “the great wash of shame”:

To hasten into consciousness the renewed menstrual mind, we might want to work with our residues of shame, which are completely related to menstrual knowledge. Shame is consciousness of ability to do evil, and it is a fundamental human quality. Shame is also acknowledgement of something unfinished, raw, and is therefore the doorway to creativity and finding solutions.... Deep shames attach to being female, and they don't diminish when we drive our shiny cars out into the world chasing our arts and sciences, learning and contributing to the new ways that men command them. We feel shame when we can't live up to all that is expected of us in



Image 5

Bickel, B. (2003). *Private Performance Ritual*. Vancouver: UBC Endowment Lands.
(photography by Cathy Pulkinghorn)

family obligations, in the world, and in our own psychological and sexual persons. (pp. 279-280)
This thesis travels through the raw unfinished edges of shame and holds the potential of finding solutions through the pedagogical practice of a/r/tography as ritual.

I regard writing as both a great privilege and a grave responsibility. Even with marginally finances, as a white, middle class, educated woman with no young children in my care and a supportive

partner. I have the ability and time to write poetry, create art, write this thesis and continue my academic studies. Privilege such as this calls for risk-taking and acts of radical trust in the cause of contributing to a more just and compassionate world.

Exposure of the body through art (image 5), and exposure of the mind through writing, is the catalyst that has forced the flow of blood/knowledge to circulate once again -- nourishing long-silenced forgotten parts of myself. Reading feminist artist, Judy Chicago's (1973) autobiography *Through the Flower*, was difficult as she reminded me so well in her writing, of the amnesia that is prevalent in the women's movement(s). Forgotten accomplishments constantly leave new generations of women in the place of replaying struggles that have already been fought. Feminist theologian, Mary Daly (1978), radically-positioned stance has kept me at a distance from her writing in the past, now pulls me towards action from a space that I know resides within me. She wrote,

Overcoming the silencing of women is an extreme act, a sequence of extreme acts. Breaking our silence means living in existential courage. It means dis-covering our deep sources, our spring. It means finding our native resiliency, springing into life, speech, action. (p. 21)

As I reflect on when my silence began I remember that I made the decision when I was about nine years old that *I would not let any one person know all of me*. I had come to that it was safer to remain silent and expose/reveal myself only in small parts to different people. As an adult I came to recognize this decision as a survival strategy that I no longer needed. How did I come to make such an extreme decision? My mothers' strong belief in privacy sheds a blanket over my young decision. She silently respected my decision to not have my silent boundaries crossed, as maybe her did before her. I respected her silent boundaries, sealing a silently made agreement of silence between mother(s) and daughter(s), connected yet separate females living within the same space (Irigaray, 1994). the act of writing, the small part of me that has survived intact, in silence, within the false security of amnesia, is at risk. I also, because of neglect, feel that she does not have the skills to stand up for herself the world.

I have lived with the silencing and dissociation that Luce Irigaray (1994) writes of:

Patriarchy... has imposed silence on the daughter. It has dissociated her body from her speech, her pleasure from her language. It has dragged her down into the world of male drives, a world

where she has become invisible and blind to herself, her mother, other women and even men, perhaps want her that way. (p. 112)

Part of my decision to enter graduate studies was to challenge the learned disconnection and foreignness with speech and language that I have often felt dragged down by and experienced as a handicap.

In her own coming to voice, Allison Pryer (2003), finds in her dissertation research that “Silence and secrecy are the defining features of childhood abuse, and are perhaps more damaging than the abuse itself”(p. 90). I read these words and I am deeply saddened. Privacy values, which often manifest as and secrecy within the home, are respected and valued in our society. I honour these values as intelligent survival strategies within the patriarchy. In choosing to look at these values outside of a patriarchal lens, survival strategy of privacy or silence can fit a defining feature of childhood abuse. Although I felt that I altered my early silent survival decision as an adult, I am faced with it anew as I struggle with the fear of danger as I now write.

The nonverbal world of my art has been my sanctuary. A deep voice within tells me that writing about the art is an act of betrayal. I have frequently turned first to writing poetry in my writing process find that poetic language has the ability to contain all and more, of a deeply felt experience. Writer and researcher Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1997) in her reflective and artistic writing encourages a willingness to open the text and reveal its many undersides, inviting relational movement and vulnerable depth of knowledge in the unfolding of the researcher’s writing process. She wrote,

My writing, my poetry can’t stay out of this research. My writing is the research; the research is writing. Poetry is subversive; reverberates.

Reverberate: to recoil *upon*, to appeal responsively *to*, rebound (p. 192).

Her words take me back to the experience of my own “women writing women” group that has supported my writing as a women researcher throughout my Masters studies. Our writing, shared in my living room early on Sunday mornings, while drinking tea and coffee, reverberates, impacts and nurtures my research and writing long after the gathering. A found poem emerges in the text collaged into one of art pieces. I am reminded that I do not have to separate my body from my words.

The poet
her body
a word cited

(from the art piece “Spinning red words together on paper”)

We “women writing women,” allowed ourselves one Sunday each month to take ourselves away from our families and other commitments. I treated this time as sacred and precious. It is an environment witnessing testimonies and deep nourishment. It is within this group that I shared my poetry born of resistance.

Betrayal

Why does writing art feel like death?
 I ask sing me a song?
 I sing the song inside my head
 it cannot be heard out loud in this space
 in front of a computer

Exposure comes
 wrapped in my mother
 fears without a blanket
 my body screams
 shakes silently
 Sweets tempt
 fill dark holes
 where body citations
 lie parallel
 await excavation

Circulation of self
 bleeds early memory
 of innocent serious pact
 to keep the real
 self secret

The final betrayal
 of the sacred
 silent agreement
 between my mother, my self
 unravels (ir)reverent touch of keys

bel hooks (1995) writes of the depth of gravity involved in the exposure of the self :

We speak to desire together – letting out the secrets and lies that keep us within fixed boundaries. Your body inside me violates the limits of flesh. We cannot go any further. The only pleasure beyond this moment where the self can be lost in another is death. Someone, anybody, must remain alive to be the witness. To tell the truth is to transgress. (p. 136)

I am about nine years old. I remember the specialness and excitement I feel as I am allowed to join my mother on her diet to lose weight. I get to make diet jello and cut it into little cubes to make the portions appear larger. Sitting at the large family table my mother and I eat the special diet jello while the rest of family eats the regular desert.

The parallel timing of my decision to keep my voice hidden and to be concerned with my body weight in my childhood reveals another strategy of survival that surfaced in the writing of this thesis. month of resistance to writing in the struggle to finish the first draft found me eating constantly while I wrote. The a/r/tographic process of art making and writing brought the gaps and holes, in my patterned ways of knowing and operating, into the light. My patterned defense to fill these holes was to literally and physically attempt to fill the holes back up so that the truth of the denied voice that was revealing to me would not surface. I have been striving for reintegration, a recomposing of my self within my Master's research. It is in the combined act of writing and making art that my fear of remembering and being seen presents itself and the conditioned split emerges to be seen, acknowledged and transformed.

Relentless resistance to writing has been a constant companion on this thesis journey. I turn to reading others writing, as a form of resistant avoidance of my own writing, as well as for inspiration. am faced with a deeply embodied opposition each time I sit down to write. If I write I may remember have been taught to forget. Consequently, I am in awe of the fact that in this thesis I am attempting to articulate, through writing academically and poetically, what I think, feel, understand and believe. In the process of reflection, questioning and supporting my statements



Image 6

Bickel, B. (2004). *Spinning Red Words on Paper*, detail. Vancouver: UBC AMS Gallery.
(mixed media collage on wood, 12 x 24 inches)

with the voices of other writers, I am taken to a new awareness of myself, my strengths and my limits.

I am remembering. As I write, I frequently get up and shift the location of my body with a anxiety and an unconscious desire to interrupt the flow of thoughts and words that part of me is terrified to write down. It is much easier to tear my writing drafts into small pieces and collage them into art (image 6). Feminist poet, Audre Lorde (1984), articulates the depth of the challenge of coming

voice that I am undertaking:

In the cause of silence, each of us draws the face of her own fear – fear of contempt, of censure, or some judgment, or recognition, of challenge, of annihilation. But most of all, I think, we fear the visibility without which we cannot truly live. (p. 42)

My own appearance and disappearance throughout the a/r/tographic inquiry has troubled and challenged my research. Although I have worked individually in the art making and writing it has been impacted, co-shaped and co-formed by the other that is within and without. Consequently I have been in an ever-emerging cycle of being lost and being found, learning and re- as I make art, write and live the inquiry.

This thesis exposes visually and in writing the tension and accompanying shame and discomfort being visible as a woman within a patriarchal society. It challenges societal ethics of private and public, reclaims ritual space for the purpose of transforming silent life-depriving survival strategies into creative life enriching responses to oppression and locations of learning.

In this Chapter, I touched upon the significance of loosing voice and coming to voice in a patriarchal society. A/r/tography as ritual is introduced as a powerful container and corrective for and repressed knowledge. This thesis engages four more discussions on my practice as a feminist artist, from the perspectives of the present research project, leading into the future. In Chapter Two I give the read/viewer a sense of my feminist background and present location. I discuss the ethics and aesthetics art making as social change and share some of my past journey as an artist. In Chapter Three I further define the emergent process of a/r/tography and share some of the a/r/tographic processes. I also posit I believe a/r/tography can offer to the disciplines of art and art education. In Chapter Four I dive into the experience and findings of the a/r/tography project, which was a solo art installation and performance entitled *Who will read this body?* I specifically look at the areas of performance ritual and the body from transformative pedagogical perspective. In Chapter Five I reflect on the ethics and aesthetics of my as a feminist collaborative artist, and share insights that emerged through the a/r/tographical study.

Just as I am not in complete possession of my art and writing, I am not in possession of the reader/viewer of my art and writing. This writing and art is a co-appearing with the viewer/reader. This

the notion of exposure and the act of co-appearing: the essential act of facing another in order to fully know the self, that French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy (2000) writes of:

I am talking about society making a symbol of itself, society making its appearance by facing... itself in order to be all that it is and all that it has to be.Being-social is Being that is by in the face of itself, faced with itself; it is *co-appearing*. (p. 59)

In co-appearing and exposing myself within, I have become more conscious of myself as an a/r/tographer. I am aware that the exposing of this work entails risk, risk for the reader/viewer and for myself. With the understanding that this is an ethical risk, I invite you, the co-appearing reader/viewer, enter performatively: engaging the images and text as a co-evolving learning. I ask you to enter and with me a ritual process within the framework of a/r/tographical inquiry and risk the transformation of shame and fear.

Em brace

Reaching

In to other

Cupped hand

cradles

The core

Life force

Soft, Wet Red, Fire

Pumping love fearlessly

[1] It is a solo project but it is still influenced and assisted by numerous others who I acknowledge, albeit, never adequately, throughout the thesis.

[2] “Phenomenology is the study of essences,” says Merleau-Ponty....phenomenology does not produce theoretical observations or accounts. Instead, it offers accounts of experienced space, time, body, and human as we live them.” Retrieved on August 8, 2004, p. 7
<http://www.phenomenologyonline.com/glossary/glossary.html#phenomenology>

[3] This is my 22nd major exhibition, 13 of these have been collaborative, all of them have included artist talks of them have included a public performance ritual.

[4] Autoethnography, according to Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (2000), “is an autobiographical genre of and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal and the cultural”. They explain it as collaging “concrete action, dialogue, emotion, embodiment, spirituality, and self-consciousness” into

stories that are related to human and institutional relationships that are “affected by history, social structure, and culture.” (p. 739)

[5] I define artist-educator as distinct from an art educator, in that the art of the artist-educator educates. As well artist-educator may teach art techniques or history as the art educator does.

[6] I use the words *transcendence* and *descent* consciously, and situate them outside of unhealthy dualisms and within the the natural cycles of life (Starhawk, 1989).

[7] I distinguish between a pathological patriarchy and a natural patriarchy (Wilber, 1995). I do not believe that all the of a patriarchal society are bad or wrong. Women have been part of the creation of this system and have received benefit as well as harm. Hierarchies that are natural promote growth and change in the system and utilize power for the betterment of whole system (eg. the structures of some spiritual ashrams). Pathological hierarchies want to stop growth and change and use power to oppress rather than draw forward. The situated power does not want to grow and change and does not have the betterment of the whole system as its purpose.

[8] The first performance ritual evolved from the Sisters (1995) project, where I worked with 22 women and realized that a releasing (permission) of the art was required. For the first time I became aware of my own unspoken assumption that the art belonged to me, the artist. I came to realize that the models/co-creators needed to be publicly visible, presenting the art me at the opening.

[9] A multi-faith event now called the Women and Spirituality Celebration.

[10] I address this in more detail in Chapter 2.