Capturing Serendipitous Moments in the Life/Work of an Artist/Teacher

Masks, 2009

My recently completed thesis is entitled, *Capturing Serendipitous Moments in the Life/Work of an Artist/Teacher*. It is focused in the area of art education and is framed by the methodology and renderings of A/r/tography and placed within a five phase creative process proposed by Tom Barone and Elliot Eisner (2012). I began this thesis with the goal of achieving a deeper understanding of how transformations of identity are navigated, essentially I considered what thoughts, feelings, and resulting understandings occur in the ongoing process of *becoming*. How can art-making facilitate and demonstrate this ongoing remaking of self? My thesis research inquires into what it feels like, looks like and means to practice as an artist and a teacher and more specifically how I have been able to merge or assimilate the role of teacher into my personal conception of self, *becoming pedagogical*.

**Literature Review**

My literature review focuses on those practitioners who, like myself, employ their artistic
practices as a means to negotiate their identities as they become connected with various communities of practice; artist, teacher, and researcher.

Pauline Sameshima’s (2007) words aptly sum up what this literature review has revealed. “Wholeness is thus living inside and outside-living a subversive esthetic, moving with conviction, away from the safety of conformity and standardization, and the fear that holds us there, to the unknown, to the new, and to the open connective spaces where the impossible becomes possible” (p. 33). Here she suggests that in order to conceive of oneself as whole, one must have the courage to disrupt, confront and reject the paradigms that contain or restrain our movements, our thoughts, and our conceptions of what is or is not possible. It is in relationships, the in between spaces, that possibility flourishes.

Detail, *Us*, 2012
Methodology

Arts Based Autoethnography

For my research I created a body of artwork consisting mostly of photography and video. This artwork and the process of making it became my data. In order to analyze my data I employed the methodology of a/r/tography.

A/r/tography is described as “...an arts and education practice-based research methodology dedicated to acts of inquiry through arts and writing” (Springgay & Irwin, 2008, p. 205). As such, it is concerned with self-study, particularly as it relates to those who practice in the various fields of art, research and teaching. This methodology resonated with me in terms of the way in which it is structured around four commitments; “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” (Irwin, 2008, p. 72). Additionally I found that the set of conceptual renderings, set forth in a/r/tographical methods, served to provoke and reposition my thoughts and actions as my research developed thus enriching and deepening the meaning within my process and findings.

Accident, 2013
DATA/Making Art

“What keeps you from your work becomes your work” (Kamanos Gamelin, 2008, p. 23).

This phrase continues to resonate with me. As I worked on my research I found that daily life seeped into and overlapped with my artmaking thus blending and obscuring the boundaries in between home, classroom, and studio. It has been in the writing of my thesis that I have come to witness this reciprocity. Additionally I have become increasingly aware of the importance that process plays in creative inquiry.

As I continue I will define and discuss each of Barone and Eisner’s (2012) five phases, which helped to frame and subsequently analyze my artmaking process. I will also briefly discuss the A/r/tographical renderings that have been used as ways to engage in, think about and ultimately generate and guide direction, understanding and meaning.

Centered, 2013
Phase I

Phase I is described as the empty canvas phase. Barone and Eisner (2012) note that this is a time of remaining open to possibilities. In this phase it is important to consider serendipitous happenings that offer possible and previously unconsidered directions. In relation to a/r/tographic considerations this is the phase of living inquiry, of openness and of addressing excess.

At this time, I began collecting and scanning old photographs and placing them in tentative groupings essentially waiting for a story to emerge. Using an initial selection of photographs I developed a number of short videos, in which I placed a few hundred images side by side while considering how meaning could be altered depending upon the configuration of imagery. I continued to think about how juxtapositions and manipulations could shape and direct meaning and eventually these interventions came to metaphorically represent the fluidity inherent to being and becoming.

Shards of Manitoba, 2012
Phase II

Phase II is a refining or editing phase. Eisner and Barone (2012) write, “...the trouble becomes more defined...a set of potential themes...begins to emerge” (p. 50). Working with images and various processes in a way that rejects seeking concrete outcomes, the researcher is able to play with the juxtaposition of imagery and ideas, setting up new tensions and possibilities. With regard to the a/r/tographical renderings that applied to my work in this phase, contiguity was a useful consideration in establishing connections and identifying relationships. Contiguity is a place of collision where neighboring, fragmented ideas and processes touch, it is the imaginary space that exists in-between photographs, between photo and text, between process and media and further, between identities artist and teacher.
Phase III

Phase III begins with a long awaited *ah ha* moment; when the data begins to reveal itself and the researcher is able to begin refining, carving out and elaborating meaning. It is the point of “...crystallization...” (Barone & Eisner, 2012, p. 50).

In this phase, I continued to create a large amount of work in a variety of art media, but I was now increasingly able to be more selective. The a/r/tographic rendering of *metaphor* was useful in establishing provocations thus generating new directions.

*Transitions, Layering, Specter*

The use of metaphors, both in imagery and in the creative process, have had the potential to enrich and direct my work through a kind of poetic translation.

*Transitions, layering,* and the notion of *specter* were prominent metaphorical concepts that served to direct and organize my art production. The transitions and layering were process-based in that my artwork was created through these physical acts. In layering one image over
another I could mimic a building up of experience and represent a physicality of memory with the layers both acting to expose and obscure simultaneously. By taking screen shots of the transitions in my videos as one image passes into and overlaps the other I was able to capture in between moments, or literal moments of transition. *Specter* is a conceptual metaphor and also the title of my art exhibition. A specter is defined as an apparition, a presence or a vision. In the context of my artwork it refers to a persistent of appearance, a haunting or a reverberation of what has passed that continues to re-emerge in the present. During this research I became aware of many visual repetitions that continue to reappear in my work. Even when I think I have forgotten something, it is rediscovered again and again.

Still from *Snow Run*, 2013

**Phase IV**

Achieving the goal of Phase IV means that the artwork coalesces. It is described by Eisner and Barone (2012) as the actual writing process where themes become increasingly evident. In this phase I considered the a/r/tographic rendering *reverberation*. Like the metaphor
of Specter, a reverberation can be understood as a persistence of a particular set of images and/or thoughts that return in waves provoking action/art-making and generating or elaborating upon themes.

Two concepts surfaced in this phase, firstly the notion of performance or ways in which we adhere to the scripts that underlie the identities we play out. Secondly the idea of trauma became a wellspring for interpreting meaning in my artwork.

In reflecting on my creative process I have been able to identify that this body of art reveals these performances but moreover has taken on an expression of the residue or specter of trauma that questions power relations in performing my identity. The images I created of my daughter running out into the snow, playing in the lake, driving into a carwash somehow purify the both of us, remove or transform past pain, trauma, and reunite us. And yet the specter remains; repercussions or reverberations of powerlessness are lessened through the making of this art. Sylvia Kind notes that art-making is a way to make meaning of what was/is going on and ultimately has the potential to “…heal us…” (2003, p. 17).
Phase V

In Phase V the completed research awaits submission to an audience. My thesis project culminated in a gallery exhibition, along with a written thesis and online blog, which was initiated in September of 2012, concurrent with the beginnings of my artmaking. The blog became a way for me to track my process and progress over this time period and helped to determine a degree of veracity or an overall sense of coherence and focus.

Eisner and Barone (2012) state that research is never truly finished as audience members will take the work and continue to make meaning of it.

![Image](image.png)

*The Artist in front of Her Work, 1996*

**Analysis: What does it Feel Like, Look Like and Mean to Practice as an Artist and Teacher**

“Pursuing an ongoing state of ‘becoming pedagogical’ requires a commitment to learning, inquiry, curiosity and the courage to change” (Gouzouasis & al, 2013).

Prior to beginning the artwork for this thesis I considered and proposed three actions. First, is the action of engaging with memory. Secondly, I assumed an attentive stance allowing for guidance from intuitive and serendipitous happenings, and lastly, I inquired into the action of creating dialogue or a series of connections. In the organization of this thesis I associated
memory with what it feels like to be an artist/teacher, serendipity with what it looks like and dialogue with what it means.

Wheel Barrow, 1968

Memory: What it Feels Like

Memory is complex and is understood as having various characteristics and types. Of interest to this study are the notions of episodic and embodied memory.

Episodic memory is autobiographical and as such requires storytelling. It “… involves the ability to recall personal experiences...through the stories we construct in order to remember” (Collins & Gallant, 2010, p. 11). Story and memory are entwined, as are the multiple socio-cultural discourses that are remembered between one another as they shape these scripts. Much of my work tells the stories of daily performances. I can look back through my collection of imagery and see myself, see in the images how my story has evolved or remained the same. Becoming aware of these patterns is key to creating a deeper understanding of self.

Embodied memory is a physical, sensual recollection, experienced by the body that can subsequently inspire artistic response. It is ignited when images, music, smells or other sensual, bodily stimuli provoke an emotional response that can be physically felt.
Serendipity: What it Looks Like

Serendipitous moments require patience and attentiveness. Cole and Knowles (2001) write, “Researchable moments are serendipitous. By their very nature they are happenstance. They cannot be predicted. They present opportunities to connect with others, to see into the inner reaches of the meaning of a life” (p. 79). They continue, noting that in day-to-day life, collisions with the unexpected “...often become turning points or moments of transformation” (p. 79).

It has been of particular importance to this research to remain alert, engaged while experimenting, playing with ideas, and living attentively as I wait for serendipity to provide me with guidance.
A Crossroad of my Own Making, 2013

Dialogue: What it Means

Carl Leggo (2008) writes that in examining our own stories we can connect to larger stories thus enriching and deepening our own lives as well as the lives of others. Our identities hinge on the fragments that we choose to share with an audience. Through conversation and dialogue our shared stories narrate the building of our identities.

This third and final part of my analysis falls into three conversations or Dialogues:

**Dialogue 1: Lived Experience/Art-making**

The first dialogue is internal, reflective and serves to make sense of my process that can then be translated and shared in words. The artwork created for this thesis speaks to how daily activity and lived experience in fact become inspiration. I understand my art-making process is a
way to restate, reexamine, recreate and respond to my fears, anxieties and joys in multimodal, visual ways. For me, art making emerges from a place without words.

**Dialogue 2: In/between images**

The second dialogue is had within the images themselves. As a collection they speak to one another revealing ongoing stories that reside in personal experience.

In examining my art making process I have been able to redefine my teaching practice. For me art-making involves the bringing together of diverse materials from an array of sources in order to communicate a selection of possibilities that the viewer can then interpret in terms of their own lived experiences. As a teacher I do the same, I become a facilitator, provoker, mentor, offering students a variety of materials and processes that they can then use to communicate and make meaning of their stories. I encourage them to consider their personal experiences as worthy places to begin artistic inquiry. Essentially I offer them my own process. Ghecevici (2010) finds that artists recreate their own experiences for their students.

Still from *Running, Pulling, and Lifting*, 2013
**Dialogue 3: In Conversation with Others**

This final conversation exposes our private inner voice to a public forum in dialogue; we are called upon to make ourselves both vulnerable and humble in relation to others. It is this candid surrendering of the intimate that allows and even provokes a mutual sharing of stories. Tami Spry (2001) suggests, “Autoethnography is a felt-text that does not occur without rhetorical and literary discipline, as well as the courage needed to be vulnerable in rendering scholarship...” (p. 714).

I have come to understand that authentic art and teaching practices require a risk of loosing face. As a teacher I live this in the classroom when I am sharing my always-personal understanding and passion about art. It is more than sharing something that I know, but rather sharing who I am that makes it feel so risky.

Through connections with others a more direct self-critique can be had. In my collegial relationships with other artist/teachers, I have been able to find reflections of self thus facilitating a formation of new possibilities for being and becoming. In communities of practice I can see and become myself in others.

**Findings: An Assessment of Transformation**

This thesis was motivated by my own personal struggle to extend understanding of my identity through an examination of how the roles I fulfill have sculpted and defined me. Like many other artist/teachers, art making has been a life long pursuit and the way in which I address and explore my lived experiences. Richard Hickman (2010) writes, “art is not only a way of knowing, but also a way of being” (p. 10).

I will now discuss my findings in terms of how memory, serendipity, and dialogue have contributed to what have I learned about the ways in which identities shift and transform.
Memory

In reflective practices we are offered the possibility of considering our past selves from a distant and thus more objectifiable position. Using my photographic collection to ignite memories and stories, to see myself as I was in a moment in the past, has provided me with the opportunity to consider how my past and present selves are connected. I continue to feel like an artist yet with each new encounter I am transformed. My identity is dependent upon and reflective of context, where I am, what I am doing, and with whom.
Serendipity

Serendipity and chance encounters, when ruminated on, allow for new perspectives to emerge. For me, it has been through a series of happenstances that I have become aware of and confronted preexisting stereotypical identities that envision the artist as unencumbered by rules whereas the teacher is submerged in regulations and regimes. In doing so I have worked towards the reconceiving of a new definition of artist/teacher for myself and perhaps for others. In a continuum of interactions I (continue to) become what I pay attention to. Or as Carson and Sumara are quoted, “Who one is becomes completely caught up with what one knows and does” (Springgay & Irwin, 2008, p. xxiii).
Dialogue

The final dialogue is had between art and audience. My work does not dictate a single nor correct interpretation. Rather I understand my art as an invitation, which asks the viewer to encounter and experience the images, sounds, and text from a unique and personal perspective.
Implications

Carl Leggo (2008) writes, “Essentially pedagogy is all about transformation” (p. 9). In my role as teacher, I will use what I have learned in regards to my own transformation to assist my students in their own personal explorations of self through various attentive acts and opportunities.

Pixies, 2013

Students Need to Engage in Authentic Art-making Processes.

Carter and Irwin (2014) state that is only after teachers “look at their experiences and subjectivities… [that they can] exercise agency in their teaching and lives” (p. 5), subsequently providing opportunities for their students to do the same. Through the process of creating art for this thesis I have come to understand that it is in the process, the looking and the thinking and the waiting, that meaning, understanding, and re-conceptions of self are able to emerge. As a teacher it is beneficial to gain awareness of and share these creative thinking processes with their students thus allowing them authentic ways in which to explore and develop their own sense of
identity, and determine who they want to become in the future. Building an understanding that identity is a fluid and ongoing process is both freeing and empowering.

*Shoveling*, 2014

**Teachers need to find communities of practice.**

A second implication surfaced by this research encourages artist/teachers to find communities of practice in which to reflect on and negotiate their identities through meaningful art-making. Alison Shreeve (2009) reminds us, “Constructing an identity of participation in a community of practice needs opportunities for imagination…having images of ourselves in this world, with pasts and futures and possibilities envisaged within the community of practice” (p. 152). Until we see ourselves reflected by others we cannot fully know the possibilities available to us.
Conclusion

It is as an artist that I have been able to negotiate my teacher identity. Identity is contextual, relational, and relies on an ability to be reflected by others. It is dependent on circumstance and fluctuates in the face of change. With a shift in perspective the disconnected fragments of self I once experienced now converge. I become an artist/teacher, an artist/researcher, and an artist/mother. My personal journey of becoming continues, always on the precipice of transformation, moving into new places, encountering and negotiating new selves into the future all the while aware that as poet Samuel Menashe (2005) claims in his poem Voyage, I am who I was.
References


