The Aesthetics of Attentiveness: 
A Philosophy for Artists and Educators

by

Erica Grimm
B.F.A., University of Regina, 1982

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment 
of the Requirements for the Degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy

in the
Arts Education Program 
Faculty of Education

© Erica Grimm 2012
SIMON FRASER UNIVERSITY 
Spring 2012

All rights reserved. 
However, in accordance with the Copyright Act of Canada, this work may 
be reproduced, without authorization, under the conditions for 
“Fair Dealing.” Therefore, limited reproduction of this work for the 
purposes of private study, research, criticism, review and news reporting 
is likely to be in accordance with the law, particularly if cited appropriately.
# Approval

**Name:** Erica Grimm  
**Degree:** Doctor of Philosophy (Education)  
**Title of Thesis:** *The Aesthetics of Attentiveness: A Philosophy for Artists and Educators*

**Examiner Committee:**  
**Chair:** Dr. Celeste Snowber, Associate Professor  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Stuart Richmond</td>
<td>Senior Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Lynn Fels</td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Heesoon Bai</td>
<td>Internal Examiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Faculty of Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Karen Meyer</td>
<td>External Examiner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Associate Professor, Curriculum and Pedagogy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>University of British Columbia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Date Defended/Approved:** April 19, 2012
Partial Copyright Licence

The author, whose copyright is declared on the title page of this work, has granted to
Simon Fraser University the right to lend this thesis, project or extended essay to users
of the Simon Fraser University Library, and to make partial or single copies only for such
users or in response to a request from the library of any other university, or other
educational institution, on its own behalf or for one of its users.

The author has further granted permission to Simon Fraser University to keep or make a
digital copy for use in its circulating collection (currently available to the public at the
“Institutional Repository” link of the SFU Library website (www.lib.sfu.ca) at
http://summit/sfu.ca and, without changing the content, to translate the thesis/project or
extended essays, if technically possible, to any medium or format for the purpose of
preservation of the digital work.

The author has further agreed that permission for multiple copying of this work for
scholarly purposes may be granted by either the author or the Dean of Graduate
Studies.

It is understood that copying or publication of this work for financial gain shall not be
allowed without the author’s written permission.

Permission for public performance, or limited permission for private scholarly use, of any
multimedia materials forming part of this work, may have been granted by the author.
This information may be found on the separately catalogued multimedia material and in
the signed Partial Copyright Licence.

While licensing SFU to permit the above uses, the author retains copyright in the thesis,
project or extended essays, including the right to change the work for subsequent
purposes, including editing and publishing the work in whole or in part, and licensing
other parties, as the author may desire.

The original Partial Copyright Licence attesting to these terms, and signed by this
author, may be found in the original bound copy of this work, retained in the Simon
Fraser University Archive.

Simon Fraser University Library
Burnaby, British Columbia, Canada

revised Fall 2011
Abstract

*The Aesthetics of Attentiveness* is the conceptualization and articulation of art-making and aesthetics as a form of understanding born out of mindful attention: an apophatic, epistemological, small humble gesture. Artists create in the contested interstitial spaces between embodied awareness, sense perception, imagination and reason; enthusiasm, dream, and disaster; affect, intuition, and intellect; wordless, timeless, experiences of unknowing and those 'known' through our embodied existence. I conceptualize the *Aesthetics of Attentiveness* as an active philosophical performative practice of inquiry. I articulate the importance of the stop, the necessity of paying attention, the fecundity of self-emptying, the risk of liminal flow, and the surprise of surfacing into wide-awareness. Through these chapter-headings I proclaim the *Aesthetics of Attentiveness* as a generative pedagogical process. I articulate the three phases of creative liminality: a recognition that to come to the act of making requires three phases of embodied engagement; the rituals of self-emptying; the liminal space of creation; and the reflective act of seeing again what the artist has come to understand through creating.

This dissertation is a philosophical poetic performative inquiry into art-making practices and aesthetics as conducted in my studio. Fueled by my art-making, research and teaching practices, I understand art as enacted by an embodied maker, made manifest through the material experiential realm and as received through another body, creating a web of culturally mediated affective, sensory and intellectual encounters. Art expresses and fosters insight in materialized experiential rather than propositional language; art enacts meaning and negotiates insight by plunging into the oceanic unknown, trusting the apophatic abyss, the liminal silent gap.

*The Aesthetics of Attentiveness* understands art as a practice of self-emptying paying attention; active receptivity and opening oneself to awareness that stops hasty conceptualization, incomplete categorization, premature conclusions: the habits of thought that blind us. Embodied self-emptying attention is at the heart of the relationship between aesthetics and ethics, releases energy to fuel the making, and is celebrated as key to being wide awake.

**Keywords:** aesthetics; arts education; art-making practices; embodied epistemology; liminality; apophatic unknowing; ethical aesthetics; mindfulness, awareness, attentiveness; tertiary arts education; performative inquiry; pedagogy; the stop; paying attention; self-emptying; liminal flow; waking up.
To midwives of body, mind and soul, with gratitude.
Acknowledgements

I am grateful to many people and wish to acknowledge:

Dr. Stuart Richmond—for your gentle, understated rigor and Dr. Lynn Fels—for teaching me to be an academic in my own skin, both master educators and mentors;

Dr. Heesoon Bai, Dr. Karen Meyer and Dr. Celeste Snowber who modelled a way to speak of the unspeakable, created clearings through which I could move, and gave me courage to speak in my own voice;

“Team Erica” who emerged unbidden and called me—body, mind and soul—back to health: Navdip, Happy, Vincent, Helga, David, Barbara, Rita, Kevin, Rina and Gerald;

the Bellevue and Assiniboia Galleries and collectors of my art work, whose incredible patience, unwavering belief and support make my work possible;

my soul sisters: Dr. Susan McCaslin, gym buddy and mystic interlocutor, for your sustaining conversation on adjoining elliptical machines; Sharalee Lewis for your clear voice; Michelle Lipka for decades long friendship and care;

Ricki and Peter Grimm whose love created and sustained me and who are now beaming, Paul and Kim Pyke Grimm, Amadea Vance and Daniel Vance who remind me who I am, bring me joy and whom I love with all my heart;

Dr. Dean Downey for your infectious love of the English language, Ludmilla Plenits for copying and coping skills; SAMC colleagues and the generous community of inquiry that develop in TWU studios each semester, and Joanie Wolfe for formatting magic.

And finally, Dave, who warmed me into life.
# Table of Contents

Approval ........................................................................................................... ii
Partial Copyright Licence ................................................................................... iii
Abstract ........................................................................................................... iv
Dedication ......................................................................................................... vi
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................... vii
Table of Contents ............................................................................................ viii
List of Figures .................................................................................................... ix
List of Poems .................................................................................................... ix

## The Stop ....................................................................................................... 1

A Verb ................................................................................................................. 6

The Ocean .......................................................................................................... 9

Embodied Perception ....................................................................................... 12

Drawing .............................................................................................................. 24

## Paying Attention ......................................................................................... 31

Materials .......................................................................................................... 33

The Body .......................................................................................................... 42

Affect ............................................................................................................... 47

Imagination .................................................................................................... 51

Context ............................................................................................................. 54

## Self-Emptying .............................................................................................. 62

Decreation ........................................................................................................ 64

Loneliness ....................................................................................................... 66

Catharsis ......................................................................................................... 76

Unknowing ...................................................................................................... 80

## Liminal Flow ................................................................................................. 86
List of Figures

Figure 1. *Lament (Procession)*, 45" x 30", graphite, encaustic and steel on board .......... 1

Figure 2. *Suspended Figure*, 30" x 60", encaustic and steel on birch .......................... 5

Figure 3. *Only say the Word*, 48" x 60", steel, graphite and pigment on board ............ 24

Figure 4. *Phoenix Heart*, 8" x 16", encaustic, graphite, steel, gold leaf .................... 31

Figure 5. *Fragments of your Ancient Name (Water)*, 15" x 60", encaustic, steel, 
maps, MRI .............................................................................................................. 33

Figure 6. *Around the Shape of My Heart*, animated gif. projected onto steel ............ 42

Figure 7. *Heaven and earth are full (Tenebrae preliminary drawing)*, 24" x 30", 
graphite on map ........................................................................................................ 62

Figure 8. *Craning into the Deer*. 18" x 12", encaustic on baltic birch ......................... 70

Figure 9. *Break and Mend*, 30" x 45", graphite, steel and 22 K gold leaf .................... 76

Figure 10. *Listen: Craning into the Deer*, 15" x 30", encaustic on board ...................... 85

Figure 11. *Liminal State*, 60" x 60", encaustic on board .............................................. 86

Figure 12. *Metaxu*, 22"x 30", 1993, graphite and gold leaf on ‘Arches paper............. 103

Figure 13. *Out of the silence you can make a promise that it will kill you to break*, 15" x 30", encaustic and steel ................................................................. 104

Figure 14. *Crown*, 30" x 22", 1993, graphite and gold on “Arches paper............. 105

List of Poems

The Ocean .................................................................................................................. 47

Recovery .................................................................................................................. 66

Being Becoming ...................................................................................................... 87

In Silence ................................................................................................................ 125
The Stop

We feel that even when all possible scientific questions have been answered, the problems of life remain completely untouched.

(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 88)

Figure 1. *Lament (Procession)*, 45” x 30”, graphite, encaustic and steel on board
Last August I was stopped. Completely, utterly, almost ultimately, from a headlong rush into deadlines, art-making and writing, I was stopped. For twenty-five years I have been making art and mentoring young people into their strengths as artists. Productivity, deadlines, openings, syllabi, curriculum, critiques, and the academic calendar ruled my life. I loved it, but I was stopped.

After spending my whole life honing perception you would think that I would have seen it coming. You would think I could have figured it out earlier—my image making being about embodiment all these many years. I blithely ignored bodily signs forcing myself to attend to an exterior drumbeat. But it was evident in my art-making, in almost every image. Looking back at this body of work now, the images frighten me in their prescience. What I had no clue about was staring me in the face. The momentum of habit, like a thick skin, had indeed made perception difficult, obscured the truth of my situation and had to be stopped. In truth, I really did not know what I was painting.

Now I feel I am waking up. I feel peeled, raw and tender. Everything looks different now. I feel real now.¹

I was stopped and I was woken up, and in the course of writing this text came to understand aesthetics in a new way. Since the word “aesthetic” shares the same etymological root with the commonly understood word “anaesthetic”, and if to be anesthetized is to be put to sleep, then perhaps the most helpful way of understanding the function of the word “aesthetic” is that it means to be awakened. For both maker and viewer, aesthetics’ chief distinctive capacity lies in its ability to enact a waking up. But what stopped me? Witnessing others come to tears in front of my paintings—what stopped them? Were these aesthetic moments? How do we understand the engagement experienced between viewer, artist, art-making context and the art itself, in this moment of the stop? Why is it important to ask these questions? What was it that obscured my vision? What was it that saved my life?

This text traces an exploratory, poetic space where narrative epiphanies and philosophical realizations led me to new understandings of art making and aesthetics. Physical, philosophical, visual and pedagogical “stops” (and their attendant epiphanies) have marked my lived, experiential and intellectual journey. In turn, I am going to take you on a journey into those stops to explore what they offer art-making and aesthetics. These stops welcome moments of attentiveness, combine lived, performative inquiry

¹ This first person narrative section is adapted from my journal and adopts an informal personal style distinct from the majority of text written in a more conventional academic voice. Other first person
with traditional scholarship, and have informed my practice of art-making, locating my work artistically, aesthetically, philosophically and pedagogically.

The principal aim of the analysis that follows, a pedagogical, performative, philosophical inquiry conducted in my artist’s studio is to discover how experiencing aesthetics as a verb—this active mindful engagement that is not containable by discursive words—makes manifest\(^2\), and therefore how its exercise can enhance the academic task. In particular I inquire into the crossroads between aesthetics and education. In speaking from within the ocean of aesthetics, I fully recognise the porous interplay between ocean, shoreline and island, and welcome streams of insight, from an archipelago of disciplinary perspectives. Besides drawing on classic aesthetics texts by Baumgarten, Kant, Wittgenstein, and Suzanne Langer, I am energized by insights from theory of knowledge expert David Appelbaum; social theorist Simone Weil\(^3\); writer Annie Dillard\(^4\); philosopher Martha Nussbaum; anthropologists Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner; Nobel Laureate Gao Xingjian; a whole community of arts-based educational theorists, \(a/r/t\)ographers, performative inquirers and artists doing ground-breaking work; colleagues and students; confident that each fluid trajectory uniquely contributes to understanding the ocean that constitutes visual art’s often wordless, but vital, contribution to life. The shape of my dissertation echoes the liminal stages that I experience regularly in the studio. Through the course of writing this text I discovered that the liminal process itself was the key to releasing aesthetic power and experiencing art-making as active, applied epistemology. These chapter-headings form my pedagogy. After being stopped, paying attention is called for; an active receptivity that invites self-emptying which releases liminal flow and the surprise of being wide awake.

**The Stop.** This first chapter defines aesthetics as a verb, an active potent force that stops preperceptions, influences and unsettles knowledge itself, whose basis is embodied sensory perception. I name aesthetics as an active embodied receptivity requiring perceptual curiosity—suspension—widening. What gives aesthetics the power to enact a waking up, for maker or viewer, is, I suggest, a necessary subjective plunging into embodied attentiveness, a perceptual suspension within an interior place of unknowing.

\(^2\) The words—makes manifest—references Wittgenstein’s famous phrase in the *Tractatus*.

\(^3\) Characterized by Camus as “the only great spirit of our time.”

\(^4\) Dillard was winner of the Pulitzer Prize when only twenty-three.
**Paying Attention.** The second chapter explores how art and aesthetics are forms of mindful paying attention. Through paying focused attention in a number of directions, artists make manifest without words. Knowing is embodied, materialized, experienced and enacted through the material realm and through material signs. Making manifest happens through paying attention to materials, the body, subjectivity, the web of culturally mediated contexts, affect, imagination, and one’s own voice.

**Self-Emptying.** In the third chapter I explore Simone Weil’s concept of decreation, Lilburn’s self-emptying, Xingjian’s loneliness and Aristotle’s catharsis as each capable of releasing energy to fuel the process of making through dislodging the egoistic self. I have come to understand art-making as applied epistemology, but significantly, as an epistemology of unknowing. Aesthetics and art-making are an apophatic epistemological force. Through trusting a cathartic complicating and completing of reason within a web of culturally mediated contexts, art-making is a means of coming to insight and understanding; aesthetics is a form of sense-making intelligence.

**Liminal Flow.** The fourth chapter explores liminality as the key to art-making and aesthetics’ epistemological power. The tripartite structure of self-emptying separation, liminal flow, and wide-awake re-entry is the key to generating new cultural knowledge, new understandings. This liminal passage through the silence of unknowing is a generative but fearful place. Artists know it well. Derrida (Derrida 386; Derrida et al. 150) names it as the abyss or as the gap and alternatively seeks to bridge or frame the fearful chasm. Nietzsche names dis-ease with silence as rooted in fear and most theorists pretend the gap does not exist, defining away the unpredictable with discursive words, stitching logical but illusory definitions over its watery depths.

**Waking Up.** Finally, the fifth chapter explores aesthetics and art-making as active, generative of new understandings marked by energy, laughter and wide awakeness. Being wide-awake has long been the focus of educational philosopher Maxine Greene, who draws on Henry David Thoreau in exploring its generative implications for education theory. Once one is wide-awake, something is kindled, quickened, and birthed, enacted into being. Educational processes must intentionally create clearings⁵ (a term

---

⁵ Heidegger uses the term clearing indicating a disclosure that clears away both concealments and obscurities and breaks up disguises, giving access to one’s authenticity (Meyer).
educational theorist Karen Meyer expands upon) to welcome what is newly emerging to be enacted. Natality, articulated by Hannah Arendt, mindfully makes space for the new.

Mindfully entering the liminal zone, whether experienced as the Stop, gap, abyss or ocean, is the key to the artistic act. Paying attention and passing through is prerequisite to releasing aesthetics potential to wake, change, empower and enact. Diving in, I chart this uncommon territory, and using words, an unavoidable second language, come to articulate the aesthetics of attentiveness.

Figure 2.  
*Suspended Figure, 30” x 60”, encaustic and steel on birch*

After being stopped⁶, it was a year before I could make art again, 8 months before I could write. I stubbornly tried, insisting I was ready. But silence kept calling me back. I ordered and organized my space, built panels, prepared surfaces, collected skins, pondered potent signs, journaled endless hints, read non-stop, bought video camera and computer programs, ordered steel and smelled wax; gathering, dancing and inquiring into an excruciating unknown. A deadline, that familiar launch into enacting, called the first piece out. “Approach your second paper as a blank slate, she said, better yet a blank canvas” and when she saw it, she was stopped. Her response was first visceral. Embodied, then reasoned; speechless, then tears. Viewers as well as artists can be stopped. Inside aesthetics meaning making sparked, connections flowed, and realizations startled.

⁶ I was stopped physically by a heart attack, a 100% block of my right coronary artery, which happened August 25th 2008 while swimming in a local community pool.
A performative encounter resonated and called forth new questions, new recognitions, and new inquiries.

Artist Statement

Suspended Figure

30" x 60"

encaustic, graphite, and steel on birch

Suspended Figure continues a longstanding visual investigation of embodiment and liminality and is the first piece finished after having a heart attack, a decidedly embodied and liminal event. Embodiment explores the ways in which the body mediates all we know, think, perceive and feel; the incarnational goodness of flesh, blood, circulatory system, and dendrites; and the vital import of attending to this bodily data. Liminality describes a suspended state between two states of being- a profound, generative and sometimes fearful place that all religious traditions try to find words to describe, the experience of which leaves one startled, attentive, aware and awake- altered, changed even in unpredictable and fundamental ways. The body is suspended between planes of steel and wax, a liminal rendering of being becoming, a figure peeled, raw, tender and real.

A Verb

As an artist and art professor my primary expertise is from the experiential side of making art. I inquire primarily from the active vantage point of a maker of art and therefore find myself, somewhat surprisingly, defining “aesthetics” not as Webster’s Canadian Dictionary suggests—as an adjective concerning the study of the beautiful, and not as a noun—the “part of philosophy that deals with the perception of the beautiful as distinguished from the moral or the useful,” but as a verb—an active potent force that influences and unsettles not just what might be narrowly defined as the beautiful, but knowledge itself, including the moral and the useful. Aesthetics, defined as a verb, is

7 This performative encounter occurred when Lynn Fels came to my studio to see the painting that I submitted as partial fulfillment for a directed reading course I took with her. The title Suspended Figure came from our conversation about the painting.
lucent and wild, unpredictable, raw and startling. Through aesthetics we can be stopped and we can be woken up. Waking up, for both viewer and maker, is what I consider to be the core signifier of aesthetics and a worthy goal for art education.

Derived from the Greek *aisthesis* (sensory perception), *aisthesthai* (to perceive) and *aisthanomai* (I perceive or apprehend through the senses), aesthetics is also rooted in sense-perceptions, ordinary feelings and spontaneous reactions from birth on, to nature and created things (Lyas 1). Although the scope of aesthetics has long since widened beyond the study of the beautiful, aesthetics is commonly thought of as an investigation of beauty, or of the connection between the arts and pleasure or perception. But aesthetics was initially conceived of by philosopher Alexander Baumgarten as something considerably wider than the study of the beautiful. Baumgarten conceived a formal philosophical discipline, a far-reaching science of knowing by means of the senses equal to, and complementing, logical knowledge (Chaplin; Shusterman *Pragmatist Aesthetics* 264). Pragmatist philosopher and philosophical aesthetics specialist Richard Shusterman describes Baumgarten’s anticipation that this science of sensory cognition would clarify thinking, improve living, provide “good foundations for all contemplative activity and the liberal arts” (264) and that one could hone sensory perception via practical exercises and aesthetic study. The science of sensory cognition was conceived of as a normative practice, “a discipline that implies exercise or training that is aimed at achieving useful ends” (264), thus developing a series of practices, exercises, and a course of theoretical study.

Shusterman points out with considerable disbelief that Baumgarten’s works are not translated into English and that he left out of his program of study any reference to the body. One wonders how one can pay attention to one’s senses, honing, extending and theorizing, without the body. For Canadian born artist Agnes Martin, winner of the Venice Biennale Golden Lion for her contribution to contemporary art, perception is the primary experience, the core of art-making practices and aesthetics. “We perceive— we see. We see with our eyes and we see with our mind … Perceiving is the same as receiving and it is the same as responding. Perception means all of them.” (Martin Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 89). Art …awakes sensibilities” (39). However,

---

8 With Kant’s work is established the focus on beauty that many contemporary scholars and artists question and widen. See for example Richard Shusterman’s articulation of somaesthetics and the recent scholarship of Barbara Bickel.
sense perception of any kind would be impossible without our body. We perceive not only with our eyes and our mind but also with our body. Wittgenstein too connects aesthetics with the body commenting in *Culture and Value* on the uncanniness of the corporeal (50e) and that “perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning.”(16e). In *Body Consciousness, A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics*, Shusterman connects these two phrases in describing “the body’s silent role as creative ground and intensifying background” (16). Seeing is not just an intellectual act but engages hands, heart, sternum; seeing is active receptivity, listening with one’s whole self, energy originating from one’s core. Mindful awareness of our body enables an attentiveness of an entirely different order to be achieved.

It is from within a mindful, fully embodied, sensorially alive, perceptual aesthetics that my work is rooted. Embodied aesthetic attentiveness “awakens sensibilities,” discovering a source of enormous potential. In the pages that follow, with Baumgarten, Shusterman and Aristotle, I understand aesthetics as a form of understanding that complements and completes logical knowledge, that does clarify thinking, improve living, and provide “good foundations for all contemplative activity and the liberal arts.” Aesthetics is a way of being in inquiry that invites embodied, perceptual, sensory, emotional and intellectual integration. Embodied sensory perception, which I will describe as a particular kind of mindful paying attention, is honed in studio practices such as drawing, but also painting, negative space studies, and other critical/creative practices that widen perception. It is precisely in studio practices, often marginalized within the context of the academy, that is practiced what Baumgarten first envisioned. In the studio is found a primer in sensory perception that develops a set of practices, exercises and a course of theoretical study. Studio practices contain vital contributions for education and all the liberal arts. In the text that follows I will return to and extend how Baumgarten first articulated aesthetics.

Generally though, it is not Baumgarten’s *Aesthetics* but Kant’s *The Critique of Judgement* (an analysis of beauty) that shaped the field of aesthetics and was seen as the canonical text, the cornerstone upon which subsequent aesthetic systems are built.

---

or against which they react. For Kant, aesthetic judgements of the beautiful constitute acts of mind, are immediate and are therefore prior to concepts and practical formulations; aesthetic judgements require subjectivity to be firmly intact. They are singular (unique) and disinterested, while also having universal resonance. Kant grounds aesthetics in subjective consciousness (Bowie 345) not in something outside one’s internal self or with one’s physical embodied self. Like Baumgarten, Kant locates sense perception within the human mind and ignores its bodily integration. Kant’s work comes to establish, somewhat unfairly, aesthetic experiences as instant and given, eclipsing Baumgarten’s insight that sense perception—and by extension aesthetics, can be honed and extended in much the same way that logic can benefit from sustained work.

Honing and expanding one’s perceptual capacities is a crucial part of what visual artists do. Aesthetics, especially from a maker’s vantage point, entails, as Baumgarten first envisioned it, a progressive sensitization and honouring of sense perceptions. Aesthetics requires a very particular type of focussed paying attention: slowing down the process of perception, speeding it up, and paying attention to what is often ignored. Further, it focuses on, in turn, sense perception, affect, intellect, intuition, historical situatedness, theory and culture. These common strategies of the studio unsettle, waking artists and others out of hastily drawn conclusions or what William James describes as preperceptions. Learning these active strategies, and discovering that aesthetics is a verb, might constitute the strongest case for including art in the core of the liberal arts curriculum.

**The Ocean**

From the vantage point of a maker, I occupy a marginal position as I inquire into aesthetics’ capacity to stop an onrushing momentum of preconception or preperception, to interrupt, change, clarify and inspire. The philosophy of aesthetics is awash with texts defining and accounting for what aesthetic value is and is not. Baumgarten first envisions aesthetics; Immanuel Kant frames the field; Hegel and Heidegger circle around origins and limitations; Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Langer, Dewey, Danto, Collingwood, Bell and Benjamin leave indelible marks. All retroactively test their aesthetic frames against Plato and Aristotle. Derrida opens and unsettles textual linkages and conclusions, but none of these theorists is an artist. Common to most of these aesthetic
theories is that discursive words and linear analysis are applied to finished works of art and nature. Curious about what the vantage point of an artist might bring to this scholarship, my analysis reflects the active process of making art. My experience and expertise lie in the intimate, vulnerable, and not always pleasurable (but occasionally ecstatic) processes of making art, and in the transmission, initiation, and mentoring of young artists entering this process. This is the basis on which I understand aesthetics to be a verb, a form of paying attention that is active, deserving of sustained effort, and an embodied process of reclaiming sensory perceptual knowing.

Initially it was in Wittgenstein’s work, whose words on aesthetics are few and who rightly might be considered a marginal theorist of aesthetics, but whose childhood was filled with art and artists and who was himself a kind of artist of philosophy, that I found a resonant structure upon which to elaborate an artist’s aesthetic (Janek and Toulmin). Commonly thought to be the greatest philosopher of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein agonized about the place of aesthetics in his epistemological narrative about the way things work. Wittgenstein used the technical analytic tools of philosophy brilliantly to parse language not as an end but as a means. In the *Tractatus*, a condensed series of aphoristic statements (which were not quite poetry, but a beautiful form was one of Wittgenstein’s aims), written in the trenches of WW II, Wittgenstein analysed how propositional language works, allowing that it denotes things like facts extraordinarily well, but that the structure of language itself limits what can be spoken of—an amazingly prescient observation from today’s postmodern vantage point. In Wittgenstein’s late work he came to see language not only as limited but as contextually located as well. Most importantly, Wittgenstein’s probing of the limits of language was largely due to his interest in what language cannot express. Paul Engelmann, architect and friend of Wittgenstein, explains:

Positivism holds—and this is its essence—that what we can speak about is all that matters in life. Whereas Wittgenstein passionately believes that all that really matters in human life is precisely what, in his view, we must be silent about. When he nevertheless takes immense pains to delimit the unimportant, it is not the coastline of that island which he is bent on surveying with such meticulous accuracy, but the boundary of the ocean.          
(Zijlstra 12)

The ocean beyond the boundary that Wittgenstein spent his life exploring was aesthetics, ethics and the mystical. In the *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein famously describes
them as being amongst what is most important in life, and that they were beyond the structural capacity of discursive words to describe. Like the shoreline of an island surrounded by the ocean, Wittgenstein spent his life meticulously exploring the shoreline of words because they bordered on what was, in his mind, most important in life: the ocean of aesthetics, ethics and the mystical (Zijlstra). And although Wittgenstein thought we could not speak about them, he did believe that they could be made manifest.\textsuperscript{10} Wittgenstein is not alone in this opinion.\textsuperscript{11} In Kant’s \textit{Critique of Judgement}, Kant’s ordered philosophy of what the mind is capable of knowing and judging, he identifies aesthetics as “what cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language,” what neither empiricism nor rationalism can account for. Using startlingly similar imagery, Derrida’s circle and abyss analogy in \textit{The Truth in Painting} accuses philosophy of confining, subjecting and submitting art to discursive text, trying to bridge over an unspeakable abyss or gap (24-36). Derrida himself alternatively seeks to bridge or frame the fearful chasm, and most theorists pretend it does not exist, defining away the unpredictable with discursive words, stitching logical but illusory definitions over its watery depths. By submitting art to text many philosophers, unlike Wittgenstein, miss aesthetic “stops,” the point of it all and the source of art-making and aesthetics’ capacity to enact an awakening. The reciprocal relationship between aesthetics and awakening is rarely simple or linear but profuses outward in wavelike currents and swells. Each of these metaphors suggests that art-making and aesthetics extend into something unknown and are poorly contained with words.

I am absolutely stopped by Wittgenstein’s ocean and island metaphor and by the similarity of his metaphor to Derrida’s view in \textit{The Truth in Painting}. Philosophical Aesthetics theorist Stuart Richmond writes:

\begin{quote}
In the artistic context, while verbal language is certainly needed to inform art-making and the understanding of art, it is the case, many would argue, that what we apprehend in art is not always communicable in words.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10} See Stuart Richmond’s 2008 article “Notes on Saying and Showing, Beauty, and Other Ideas of Interest to Art and Education, with Reference to Ludwig Wittgenstein,” also several essays in \textit{Landscapes of Aesthetic Education} and “Understanding Works of Art, the Inexpressible, and Teaching: A Philosophical Sketch.”

\textsuperscript{11} It is my belief that this core belief did not change even in his late work. In the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} Wittgenstein observes that language is contextually located and functions much like games do, having different rules in different contexts. In my view language games can be understood, to continue the metaphor of the island and the ocean, as the splintering of the one island of language into an archipelago of islands all surrounded by the unspeakable ocean.
Indeed, visual art is not in the first instance, a verbal discipline. Experience of art includes what is strictly inexpressible. Here, in a seeming contradiction, I think of an artwork’s unique expressive qualities, or character, for example that can defy description. Wittgenstein would agree, and this is what has endeared him to artists. He was less interested in doctrines than in a style of seeing and was in that sense an artist himself, as Perloff (1996) points out. He had the conviction that the really important things in life, such as values in ethics and aesthetics and the meaning of life itself, could not be addressed by science nor captured in propositional language. Such things are revealed if at all, he believed, indirectly, through subjective or mystical insight, and by poetry and art. (Richmond, Understanding Works of Art 2-3)

I am thrilled and energized by the ocean/island (archipelago) metaphor, by its potential and by its resonance with my own experiences making art and mentoring young artists. Understanding that art-making and aesthetics make manifest by plunging into an ocean beyond the capacity of discursive words to describe, visual art starts where discursive language ends. And just how visual art makes manifest, how it can stop, unsettle and change, is the question I ask in these pages.

Playing on this analogy I recognise my exploration of aesthetics to be located not from the safe vantage point of the shoreline of discursive words, but from having plunged into that bracing, unpredictable and often chaotic ocean and from being tossed about in its watery depths. Fully awake, I explore the “unspeakable” ocean, tap into ways of knowing that extend beyond the discursive, recognise methodologies that hone attentiveness, honour perception, require fully embodied beings, embrace chaos and invite self-emptying. The ocean that is aesthetics is deeply respectful of the porous shoreline of theory, and connects with rhizomatic fecundity to many disciplines absorbing their insight and content. From this active immersion inside the ocean of aesthetics I attempt to understand its powerful energies, chart its currents, waves and undercurrents, and parse the processes and potencies of art-making. Returning to the border territory between discursive words and the unspeakable, I attempt to give words to the ocean’s powerful currents and watery depths.

**Embodied Perception**

*In the pool. Hands reach up, jump, arc and plunge. Cool water startles…push and kick; inhale… then comforts, as it rushes past my face. Stroke, pull, kick, kick, kick, and slow exhale. Anxiety slackens. Gravity bound body responds. Buoyant and*
relaxed, I settle into a rhythm. Kick, kick, kick, stroke, pull, and breathe. Enjoying the pace, the blue green water and blurred edges of underwater form, fluorescent-lit dazzled surface falls away. Kick, kick, kick, stroke, and breathe. Rhythm is marked by not counting laps. If I count laps the time is almost wasted. If I count laps I remain locked in mundane, ordinary, analytical time. When the rhythm takes over and I am no longer conscious of each stroke, kick, breath, each push off the wall, the repeated movement takes me elsewhere...stroke, pull, breathe, kick, kick...to a blessed unselfconsciousness where awareness of time melts away, thoughts connect and recognitions arise. Mid-lap I sense an interruption, an odd sensation from sternum to mid chest, and a whispered, inaudible ‘pay attention’. Something is indeed happening; nausea and cold sweat erupt, I find myself surrounded by curious faces and am handed a bottle of water. Sirens wail.

How might aesthetics stop, disrupt, rearrange, clarify, change, inspire or wake us up? And what is at risk if we refuse to pay attention? In this section I explore that what gives aesthetics the power to totally change one’s life—enacting an awakening for maker and viewer—is a subjective welcoming of embodied attentiveness, a perceptual suspension within an interior place of unknowing, curiously holding embodied sensory, affective and intellectual data, and trusting a cathartic complicating and completing of reason within a web of culturally mediated contexts. Continuing the metaphor of the ocean, aesthetics requires full immersion, jumping in with the whole self. But before this occurs, what has previously been happening and assumed needs to be stopped.

According to philosopher David Appelbaum, “the momentum of habit and preconception makes observation difficult. In fact, the element I speak of is precisely that which breaks an onrushing momentum and opens experience to another point of view. I call it ‘the stop’” (Appelbaum ix). He describes “the stop” as a turn in awareness necessary to arouse consciousness from sleeping, key to initiating a journey of passing from ignorance to knowledge. The stop is intense enough to move one out of preconceptions and towards consciousness. Once stopped, Appelbaum proposes active receptivity, welcoming, trusting and exerting an atrophied, embodied, visual perception to re-sensitize sight and discover a new way. For the artist, the stop is a vital means by which something new is brought into being. For viewers, the stop opens their perception and awareness to being changed by what they are seeing.

Unfortunately, active receptivity is an uncommon practice. More often sight becomes dull; we cease to see; understanding is clouded.
When sight ceases to be related to its organic condition, it loses its freshness of perception. It fails to penetrate assumptions we project about ourselves and grows increasingly intellectual—a tendency our philosophical tradition has condoned. Tradition accepts the replacement of percept by concept. It accepts the replacement of vision by thought-construct. It accepts the results of a blind trust in intellect, namely that the visual field ceases to be part of the sensory display as a whole and instead remains detached from other sense experiences. (Appelbaum x-xi)

Appelbaum warns against a “disembodied, disjoined, and disenchanted” (29) blind trust in intellect cut off from perception and asks a question that I ask every year as I prepare syllabi for the upcoming semester’s studio classes: “How can the eye perceive the suchness of the world?” (xi). Appelbaum answers this question with words that might be spoken in a typical drawing class:

Embodied visual perception takes in an impression in a unique way. Not only is a thing unaltered (to fit a private intelligence), it also supplies an energy by which to reveal the context of vision. The progressive refinement of the eye’s function opens a visual field so as to include the one who sees … resensitizing sight … Engrained habits of disembodied sight give over to fuller intenser visual perception. How? In the simplest of terms, the first must come to a stop before the second can begin. The momentum of received visual learning must be arrested in order for a new (or renewed) function of sight to commence. (Appelbaum xi)

The halting gait of a blind person is the metaphor Appelbaum uses for how the human arrogation of knowledge has been blinded by forsaking its embodied condition. In The Stop Appelbaum illustrates that unexpectedly, the strength of embodied perception can be uncovered/discovered/stumbled upon under conditions of blindness. When deprived of vision, an atrophied embodied perception is awakened, providing a rich and otherwise overlooked source of knowledge. The blind person must exert perception in a new way, by touch, slowly and effortfully. Deprived of sight, the blind person’s “body becomes available to an attentiveness of an entirely different order” (Appelbaum 78). In a blinded state embodied sensory perception can be re-inhabited and re-enchanted, discovering a halting but authentic path forward into the unknown.

In both the studio and the gallery, the “momentum of habit and preconception” short-circuits observation and curtails the processes that arts education seeks to release. Similarly, codifying or relying on a set of rules or formula merely avoids this risky but
generative place. Art-making can be inspired by, can be given courage by the rules, but the rules model how others have found a way, and in the end each artist discovers that mastering the rules is not the point; art’s nature is not to be fully governed by rules, even as there are plenty of rules to learn. In the end being stopped, practicing embodied perception, re-sensitizing sight, then attentively, haltingly groping one’s way into this liminal place—glimpsing with more clarity the external world that first conditioned us—is the only way to make art.

An in-between pause between stopping what came previously and before launching into something new is crucial. “Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other” (Appelbaum 15). This space of unknowing, requiring extended perceptual attention is an essential part of the experience Appelbaum names as the stop. What Appelbaum describes—what I experienced physically and continue to experience regularly in the studio—can also be understood as a liminal experience, a word ethnologist Arnold van Gennep identifies in his seminal Les rites de passage. From an anthropological lens a liminal experience is an in-between state (containing three distinct stages) that accompanies any important life passage, transferring the individual from one state of being to another state of being. Seeing its potential for wide application, cultural anthropologist Victor Turner widened the term liminal (the betwixt and between) well beyond referring narrowly to rites of passage, and applied it to performative encounters. With Turner I recognise the enormous potential application of the “liminal in between,” and am stopped by the recognition of both “the stop” and liminality, particularly in how they both seamlessly connect with Wittgenstein’s ocean and island metaphor.12 Aesthetics and art-making require and hone the very embodied perceptual attentiveness that Appelbaum calls for and that is necessary to extend beyond the shoreline of discursive text.

Furthermore, the embodied perceptual extension into a space of unknowing that Appelbaum and Van Gennep name is precisely what I will present through the course of this text as the key to understanding aesthetics as applied epistemology,13 indispensible to full rationality and of benefit not only in the studio but to the entire academy. Blindly

12 Chapter 4 discusses liminality in some depth.
13 See Gerhard Richter The Daily Practice of Painting who uses the phrase “painting as a kind of applied epistemology.” (68)
groping into “the unfamiliar” is a place of displacement, liminality and fecundity. It is a fearful place. But in order to make something that was not there before, artists have to trust this place of unknowing. Arrest, unexpected choice and risk, are harnessed, artists “straddle the not yet real and real world(s); and, in the interstices, a possible not yet known world becomes known” (Fels, *In the Wind* 51).

David Appelbaum, David Abram, Merleau-Ponty, Charles Taylor and a host of other scholars (Appelbaum; Abram 31-32; Leder 108-115; Merleau-Ponty 40, 43-45; Shusterman 185, 266; Fels *In the Wind* 39-41;Taylor 143-158) all refer to Rene Descartes’ (1596-1650) work, seminal though it was, as also being responsible for radically reframing sensory perception and embodied knowing, lacing it with suspicion. Descartes abandoned perception as unreliable in favour of the intellect’s mediation of experience, and without doubt enormous gains have been made. But along with the triumphs of intellectually mediated knowing came dismissal of embodied perceptual experience. Rather than identifying sensory perception with different but equally vital purpose, it was seen as misleading, unreliable, untrustworthy, and, as with anything unpractised, it lost regard. Appelbaum summarizes the Cartesian success in re-defining seeing, stripping it of intrinsic worth.

He [Descartes] does this in such a persuasive way that almost four centuries later our sightedness has still not recovered. We see not with our eyes but our brains. This is our Cartesian heritage. To set seeing equal to gazing is to alienate the eye from the field it illuminates and cleave it from an active receptivity that is its birthright. (Appelbaum 57)

Descartes’ influence is evident to this day in the typical academic curriculum, where very little cultivates ordinary embodied ways of knowing and experiencing. Hence the existence of studio art programs in the academy are vital as they exercise multiple ways of knowing–combining perceptual widening with philosophical inquiry, artwork emerging out of the interstices between the two.

Applebaum is not the only scholar to point out the paucity of a strictly intellectual epistemology and the problematic lack of embodied, somatic knowing. In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor notes the radical rejection of traditional ontology that the Cartesian revolution begat. Like Appelbaum, Taylor notes that after Descartes, knowing through the senses was shot through with suspicion. Knowing came to be sought through
detached observation, mediated through the power of thought and objectification. Taylor, Abram and Appelbaum all lament the subsequent view of the world as mechanical, disenchanted, that sensory perception ceased to exist as a vehicle for psychic or expressive contents or as a medium through which the spiritual could appear. Like Appelbaum, central to Charles Taylor’s philosophy is his conviction that we know the world through our embodied engagement in it.\textsuperscript{14} We know the world through a porous interplay, an inter-relationality between our bodies and our cultural/social situations.

Dismissal of knowing through the senses is also rooted in Plato’s model of knowledge since he places the senses well below his elevated apex of thought and intellectual rationality. In \textit{The Republic} Plato rejects the senses as misleading and untrustworthy; the chains in his cave, like the senses themselves, must be thrown off in order for rationality to be realized.\textsuperscript{16} Plato’s theory of knowledge values the intellect alone as necessary and sufficient for correct choice and condemns emotions and imagination as detrimental to rationality. Nussbaum argues, drawing from Aristotle’s theory of knowledge, that rationality is insufficient without the intelligence emotions and imagination bring.

Aristotle’s epistemological picture of “the way things are” is radically different than Plato’s.\textsuperscript{16} In book six of \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} Aristotle identifies multiplicities of knowing: theoretical, practical and productive. Art is significantly included, along with science, practical wisdom, theoretical wisdom, and intelligence, as a means by which truth is attained, not led astray (Eisner 3; Aristotle 98-114). It is specifically this widening of knowledge to include multiplicities of knowing, that makes Aristotelian based epistemology compatible with aesthetics and art-making.

Aristotle welcomes perception into his epistemological model as necessary to complete rationality, a point that Martha Nussbaum convincingly argues in her chapter “The

\textsuperscript{14} In an interview on the CBC program Ideas, Taylor relates how deeply embedded the Cartesian story is in the western imagination. That people can easily relate to the image of “brains in vats” in the film the “Matrix” for example is for Taylor unbelievable.

\textsuperscript{15} Plato actually recommends banning artists from his ideal city-state while ironically freely uses the poetic art of story-telling, myth making unrepentantly in order to convince. And largely due to his compelling ability to use metaphor—the cave, the line, and the Tale of Er (the ending climax of the \textit{Republic})—he tells his epistemological tale convincingly.

\textsuperscript{16} Unfortunately and possibly due to the startling absence of metaphor, story or myth in Aristotle’s dense prose, his epistemology is not nearly as well-known as Plato’s. That \textit{Nicomachean Ethics} is written to Aristotle’s son, a gift of wisdom he wished to pass on to him, makes the complete lack of narrative, myth or metaphor in his text even more sadly ironic given that his theory makes ample room for it. Had his form reflected the love he obviously felt for his son, his epistemological tale might be more commonly known and more widely influential.
Discernment of Perception: An Aristotelian Conception of Private and Public Rationality” (75-82). She explains that Aristotle identified perception as a “complex responsiveness to the salient features of one’s concrete situation” (55) and as necessary for discernment. Secondly she identifies that for Aristotle the ordinary material conditions were worthy of close looking since their unique particularity is prior to universals derived through thought. And finally, she asserts that Aristotle defends “the emotions and the imagination as essential to rational choice” (55). This is a radically different position than Plato’s, whose work has contributed to a wide-spread belief that inviting sensory, perceptual, affective or intuitive processes into the rational act were a logical impossibility. Due to Plato’s rejection of the body, affect and sensory perception were separated from cognition. But Aristotle makes no such distinction, seeing perception as vital to cognition, being comprised of emotional, practical, imaginative, and intellectual insight.

Likewise, Wittgenstein believed that it was entirely possible to know something without being able to say it, implying that there exists more than one type of knowing.

> Compare knowing and saying: how many feet high MontBlanc is—how the word ‘game’ is used—how a clarinet sounds. If you are surprised that one can know something and not be able to say it, you are perhaps thinking of a case like the first. Certainly not of one like the third.

*(Wittgenstein Philosophical Investigations 31)*

Wittgenstein resisted separating philosophy from the rest of life as evidenced by his lifelong discontent with interpretations of his work while at Cambridge. When frustrated by conversations with Cambridge and Vienna Circle philosophers, he resisted answering his fellow philosophers’ questions, reciting passages from Bengali mystic poet and first Asian Nobel Laureate, Rabindranath Tagore by heart (Dutta and Robinson 178; Janik and Toulmin 257). Possibly this action echoed the rich and divergent conversations of
the family home of his youth.\textsuperscript{17} He certainly recognised the limits of a rigorously intellectual analytical philosophical model while simultaneously mastering it. In retrospect, Wittgenstein’s lively intellectual formation might shed light on his discontent. Wittgenstein might have agreed with Eliot Eisner,\textsuperscript{18} who states “one of the major weakness of the logical positivist movement was a tendency…to dismiss poetic and metaphorical language as meaningless utterances” (Eisner 9). A more widespread understanding and acceptance of Aristotle’s epistemological position (rather than Plato’s or Descartes’) might have mitigated this dilemma and integrated Wittgenstein’s valuing of vital parts of life with the philosophy of Russell’s Cambridge.

Not many years later, Michael Polanii, made a similar distinction between what he called tacit and explicit knowing summarizing in the introduction of \textit{The Tacit Dimension} by saying “we can know more than we can tell” (4; Eisner \textit{Art and Knowledge} 5). Integrating subsidiary awarenesses, ranges of conceptual, sensory information and images all contribute to making sense of things and lead to acts of discovery (Polanyi 4). Furthermore, codification need not be into language. Eisner points out that “it has become increasingly clear since the latter half of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century that knowledge or understanding is not reducible to language. …The liberation of the term knowledge from dominance by the propositional is a critical philosophical move” (Eisner \textit{Art and Knowledge} 5) allowing for knowledge and understanding to be arrived at in multiple ways. “Words aren’t the only symbols and books aren’t the only [meaning-making] texts.” Allan Neilsen states in an article that explores whether paintings are texts (Cole et al. 289). Eisner makes clear that the widening of our understanding of the term knowledge beyond propositional literal understanding is a key philosophical premise upon which the explosion of arts-informed qualitative research is built (Eisner \textit{Art and Knowledge} 3-12).

\textsuperscript{17} Wittgenstein grew up in a home that clearly valued the arts and the intellect. The Wittgenstein family home was filled with art and artists, hosting concerts and incredibly rich interdisciplinary conversations amongst a diverse array of intellectual and artistic elites during the last years of Habsburg Vienna. Toulmin and Janik argue that these conversations were key to one of the “most fertile, original and creative periods in art and architecture, music, literature and psychology, as well as philosophy” (6) in Western Europe, playing a formative role in Ludwig’s notion of what philosophy was and how to go about it (Janik and Toulmin). Sigmund Freud, Arnold Schonberg, Adolf Loos, Gustav Klimpt, Oskar Kokoschka, Arthur Schnizler, Karl Kraus, Gustaf Mahler, Clara Schumann, and Pablo Casals were known to the family and are only a few of the best known luminaries, whose animated cross disciplinary conversations interlinked philosophy and with all aspects of contemporary culture (Kanterian 11-29; Janik and Toulmin,13).

\textsuperscript{18} Elliot Eisner is Professor Emeritus of Education and Art at Stanford University, who has championed arts-based research methodologies.
In the mid-90’s, joining an increasingly widespread acceptance of multiple ways of knowing, understanding and researching, arts educators and educational researchers exploded with a “revolution” of qualitative research methodologies: narrative inquiry, writing as inquiry, living inquiry, A/r/tography, embodied ways of knowing, poetic inquiry and performative inquiry. Texts like *The Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research*, introduced by Eisner’s first chapter on “Arts and Knowing”; Graham Sullivan’s *Arts Practice as Research*; as well as prolific publications from A/r/tography and performative inquirers, present arts-based processes as legitimate research and along with philosophical aesthetics theorist and photographer Stuart Richmond, as forms of understanding. Understanding is mutable and fluid and can be worked out through a variety of forms of representation, whether they are known as sign systems, texts, or artworks, and do not necessarily require words. Wittgenstein and Polanyi liberate knowledge from narrowly referring to the propositional, and Canadians Fels, Richmond, Snowber, Neilsen and A/r/tography artist/researcher/teachers along with theorists and

---

19 Taylor, Eisner, Appelbaum, Nussbaum, Merleau-Ponty, Michael Polany amongst others.

20 A/r/tography is an arts and education based research methodology that theorizes the research practices engaged in by artist/researcher/teachers as practice based, situated in lived inquiry and utilizing rhizomatic networks of connections. The name exemplifies the equality and relationally between artist, researcher and teacher as they occur simultaneously in and through time and space. Rita Irwin and Kit Grauer, are key to the development of a community of prolific a/r/tographers revolutionizing the practice of research by inquiring into and through the arts as tools of research. A/r/tography, *Rendering Self Through Arts-Based Living Inquiry* published in 2004, and followed by *Being with A/r/tography* in 2008 are two key publications. “A/R/Tographic Collaboration As Radical Relatedness”; *Lingering in Liminal Spaces: A/r/tography as Living Inquiry in a Language Arts Class”* and “The Rhizomatic Relations of A/r/tography” focus on key concepts of living inquiry and collaborative practices that inquire into and (re)search the world to enhance human understanding.

21 Fels writes in her faculty profile at Simon Fraser University: “Performative Inquiry is an arts-based research methodology that invites cross-disciplinary exploration through drama/theatre, visual arts, dance, writing, and/or music. Researcher and participants engage in artistic practices and creative activities in order to investigate a research question or inquiry. Theoretically located within the interstices of complexity theory, enactivism and performance studies, performative inquiry calls attention to our everyday habits of engagement, our assumptions, our practices, who we are in relationship to others and our environment. Performative inquiry investigates the emergent ‘stops’ (Appelbaum, 1995)—*moments of risk, moments of opportunity*—that a performative lens brings to our inquiry and pedagogy. A stop is an interruption to our daily scripts, the roles we play, or those created by others for us to perform. Performative inquiry requires of its practitioners embodied ‘wide-awakeness’ (Greene, 1978) so that we might in turn ask the question of each other and ourselves in our multiple locations (e.g. social, political, physical, pedagogical, communal), ‘Who is performing who?’”

22 See Richmond’s article “Understanding Works of Art, the Inexpressible, and Teaching: A Philosophical Sketch” in which he outlines the elusiveness and import of the concept of understanding, especially in an educational context. Drawing on Wittgenstein, Richmond shows understanding to be varied, indeterminate and context sensitive. “Understanding involves an experiential and imaginative synthesis of a work’s concepts and features, inexpressible aspects and the viewer’s subjective contribution.” He comments on Wittgenstein’s position that understanding is “developed largely in the public practices of using language.”
practitioners in institutions throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand continue to liberate the term knowledge from being exclusively propositional. They all demonstrate that visual arts practice is a legitimate form of research, and is a form of knowing or understanding (Springgay et al.; Aoki, Pinar and Irwin; De Cosson and Irwin; Sullivan; Cole et al.; Richmond and Snowber). Across the literature art is understood as metacognitive and reflexive, as a form of understanding, as an experiential, emergent and embodied practice that constructs new understandings, rather than reconstituting the familiar.

Most of these methods of inquiry radically reimagine the possibilities of inviting lived experience, specifically embodied, sensory perceptual ways of knowing back into the epistemological model. Via an active engagement in and through art-making, insight and knowing are realized, understanding arrived at. These methods of inquiry also represent an unprecedented fecundity of disciplinary merging, honouring text and image-based products, embodied processes, words and silence, knowing and unknowing. Disciplinary boundaries dissolve in a common interpretive turn, rewriting approaches to research and theory. As poet scholar Lorri Neilsen writes:

The shift in educational inquiry marked by alternative forms of representation, including the literary arts, is a shift as much ontological as it is epistemological. Fiction is knowledge. Poetry is knowledge. The arts are ways of knowing. The lingering belief that knowledge is and must be proof, proposition, muscle for prediction and control is bound inextricably with our Western belief in the individual as a separate, autonomous being. It is bound inextricably with our need to tame the earth and its creatures, and it is bound inextricably with our fear of the unknown. We have wanted to accumulate knowledge and to use it as foundation, as fact, as colonialist, neocolonialism and imperialist commodity, as clout, and as cultural capital. But we are fooling ourselves if we think we can trust knowledge more than we trust fiction to guide us, to teach us. Knowledge, like fiction itself, is liminal space. It never arrives. It is always on the brink. It is always a waiting space, a green room, Derrida's differance, a journey. (Neilsen 206-214)

Reading Lorri Neilsen's, and Lynn Fels insightful, soulful, courageous, poetic research, I feel like weeping with relief. I have never encountered academic dissertations and texts quite like these. "We are the blood in all languages that create us…” (Neilsen in Springgay et al. xv). "To realize the possibility of absence, the unknown, the unexpected, performance requires researcher and participants to have courage to release the known, to freefall, whiteknuckled, grasping skywind, into an unseen horizon” (Fels 70). Fels wishes to “spell the univers(e)ity
in as yet new way of knowing being doing creating” (88). Neilsen describes her dis-ease with research methodologies whose language suggests “a uniform and weapons...capture, threat, validity, defence—although I was never certain who the enemy was except, perhaps, a quick-witted but hapless strategy, and contemptuous about ideas such as wisdom, generosity, silence, liminality, unknowing, love and faith (Neilsen, 2002). I was as certain then as I am now about the necessity of “a living inquiry... the work of the heart, the hands, our sense-making body, our many-toned voices” (Neilsen, 1998, 207); a living inquiry welcomes movement and change, does not aim for mastery of cherry blossoms or ideas, is comfortable not only with the body resonant (Neilsen, 2004) but with the resonances, ruptures, emergences, and urgencies of bodies larger than our own; classrooms, societies, ecosystems. ... All this inquiry asks is that we attend, that we listen, attune ourselves so that we may come to our senses” (Neilsen in Springgay et al. xvi). This work resonates, opens possibilities, rings true, and gives words to my experience and sense-making with in my own studio, classroom and life. I read Neilsen’s courageous proclamation, “Fiction is knowledge. Poetry is knowledge. The arts are ways of knowing, and they are all liminal spaces, thresholds, impermanent.” (Neilsen 206-214), her call to explore “the epistemology of the heart” and her commendation to let go. I am stopped by Lynn’s text, by her invitation to her readers: How far will you allow me to take you?

These texts give me permission to be an academic in my own skin, writing through experience to understanding. Researching as I experience it in the studio, no need to translate into another more formal language, no need to defend the use of metaphor. Their words give me courage to write what I know to be true about art-making and meaning, being in inquiry, their texts model the non linear multiple processes of this vital academic task. Loving ideas and philosophical texts and being energized by seeing connections between disciplines and data but feeling dismissed, shut down and suffocated by the analytical methods that seek to resolve knowledge to one sharp point of truth, I breathe deeply and celebrate the process of inquiry and connecting cascading possibilities that open.

My experience of the studio is that it is a liminal space, an action-site for knowledge creation that is multiple, simultaneously situated in one’s head and in one’s core, in the senses, in the mind and in perceptions, seeing the ordinary as charged and transfigured, as worthy of extended looking, extended scrutiny, and as fully enchanted. The attentiveness cultivated in the studio rebalances ways of knowing, complicating and resisting all easy readings. In the studio knowledge creation is full of complexity and
chaos, thriving by tearing down disciplinary silos, connecting with rhisomatic fecundity. When the instructor is wide awake what is cultivated is a gaze\textsuperscript{23} that honours perception, that “tests thinking in the body”\textsuperscript{24} as Canadian dancer Margie Gilles eloquently says and that unflinchingly lingers in this liminal place. The basic strategies of the studio consist of extending and opening the perceptual attentive gaze as long as possible before invoking closure. This attentive gaze, quite unlike Lacan’s anxious gaze, dissolves the separation between subject and object, recognising the fluid reciprocity between one and another, radically re-stitching and reconstituting the interrelatedness between one and another. Studio practices re-search, search out connections between disciplinary data banks, disrupt linear trajectories of knowledge construction, dissolve boundaries and connect disciplinary silos with rhisomatic glee. For viewer and maker both, aesthetic strategies break open settled conceptions through trusting marginalized embodied, sensory perceptual, affective, attentive knowing. Seeing and gazing as an attentive, focussed, mindful process that is unselfconscious is the practice I seek to engage my students in\textsuperscript{25}.

I recognise common ground between Appelbaum’s, Neilsen’s and Fel’s resonant insights, with common strategies of the studio that are designed to re-sensitize sight. Aesthetics offers to the academy marginalized methodologies from the studio that rebalances concept and percept, and re-integrates perception, intuition, intellect, and affect, an epistemology of the heart, body, mind and soul. Aesthetics’ chief contribution to the academic task is in righting the balance between percept and concept by providing a means of honing, extending and honouring sensory perceptual knowing and reintegrating it with intellect, affect and practical reason. These inquires name the “stop”, moments of poise, the in-between interstices, liminal unknowing and trust embodied perception. “Imaging into being” (Fels In the Wind 6), these “space-moments of crisis and possibility” (6, 33), cultivate “new eyes” (6), practice “bodymind dancing on the edge of chaos spelling the unknown into presence” (90). They work “within and through form and simultaneously through the destruction of form” (55), realize “a precarious balance that realizes pattern-possibilities” (55) “free-fall[\textsuperscript{26}] into the interstices between the real and

\textsuperscript{23} The gaze that I am talking about here is unlike Lacan’s anxious state produced by the awareness that one is visible to another’s gaze, it is also unlike Foucault’s medical gaze or Mulvaney’s male gaze. It is almost exactly opposite, I refer to a gazed marked by focused attention and self-emptying.


\textsuperscript{25} It is primarily through drawing practices that this perceptual gaze is cultivated and taught, the mechanics of which I deal with in detail in the section Drawing.

23
the not yet real worlds where absence becomes present” (57). They are “moments of stop, moments of crisis, moments of risk” (74).

However, sometimes artists, no less than other academics, get stuck—stop seeing, accept received intellectual formula—and are led astray. Accordingly, drastic means are necessary to coax, cajole or shock—out of one’s visual forays—ingrained patterns of thought or too quickly formulated conclusions (even if these investigations feel like big accomplishments). Only then can the artist begin to unfold, by means of visual form, something that surprises even the artist. In Appelbaum’s The Stop and in Fels’ performative inquiry I recognise a cluster of generally forgotten embodied perceptual capacities, ways of knowing and ways of being that illuminate aesthetics. Reclaiming these potent aesthetic ways of being, we can break into received conceptions (momentums of habit that prevent perception) and wake up.

Drawing

Figure 3. *Only say the Word*, 48” x 60”, steel, graphite and pigment on board
In the studio. Peter is modelling today, an amazing 60-year-old professional model, famous in the art community in Vancouver. He is covered with tattoos and will sometimes vocalize while modelling. This can put people off. He takes his craft very seriously, refusing to be photographed and, due to the reverence he accords to the sacredness of the body, refuses to model draped. He travels on bike all over the Lower Mainland, no doubt a factor contributing to his flexibility and ability to hold extraordinarily challenging poses for long periods. He arrives, we chat about the notions behind some of the work in progress in the studio, none of which I feel too clear on, and Peter explores some possible poses. I am searching for the pose too, since it is not clear in my mind what I want, but as he cycles through possibilities some resonate and others do not, until there it is. This pose is the one. I know when a pose is right by a kind of intuitive assent resonating in my sternum.

We settle on three. I will work sequentially on three prepared surfaces–large 5’ x 5’ panels of beautiful Baltic birch, covered with 5 layers of the gesso that I make by heating gelatine and calcium carbonate with water. Today I am working uncharacteristically on an unsanded surface, matte and absorbent, which takes graphite beautifully–a surface more sensitive than paper- H pencils are silvery with a huge tonal range and B pencils range through to velvety pitch black. They are difficult poses even for Peter to sustain; he holds them for 5-minute intervals, cycling between them as I lean each panel in place, one by one. Despite the physical awkwardness of moving the panels we settle into a good working rhythm, conversation trails off, sentences hang unfinished as line turns to form, edges continue, angle, indent and take me on a wordless journey as time drops away.

Graphite marks on dry ridges of gesso, hand and erasure smear graduations built with a balance between control and calligraphic gesture. The unfamiliarity of the unsanded surface interacts with the graphite stick in an amazing way, very different to the smooth surface that I am used to. Negative space guides the form and nothing has a name. Form gathers but it is always a surprise, it is not really Peter; when moments of presence appear I try to stop and retain them before it is layered over. My best drawings are sparse and something is expressed with very simple lines. Nothing can be faked with line. It is about listening really. I listen to my hand, my awareness indwelling the pencil tracing lines over ridges of gesso, listening, paying attention to the form in front of my eyes, exploring unrecognizable angles, intersections, distances, all edges never seen before. When I am drawing I am unaware of myself, and silence is palpable. It is in these moments of silence that I feel most fully alive.

Suspending and prolonging perception by keeping at bay closure by stereotypic categorizations or symbols is the core of aesthetic attentiveness and Appelbaums’s definition of the Stop. It also describes current drawing pedagogy. Received formulae, whether visual or conceptual, no matter how reasonable or culturally current, need to be checked against perceptual experience lest they leads us astray. Every drawing instructor creates sequences of perceptual exercises where a student can glimpse a
progressive widening of his or her visual horizons and experience sight re-sensitized, an open visual field. Matisse said that it takes something very much like courage to see through the stereotypic images that “are to the eye what prejudices are to the brain” (Flam 199). The bulk of the drawing curriculum is designed to help students pay attention, recognize and stop predictable regurgitation of received images, and enact a kind of visual waking up. Annie Dillard renders a similar visual waking up:

When her doctor took her bandages off and led her into the garden, the girl who was no longer blind saw “the tree with lights in it.” It was for this tree that I searched through the peach orchards of summer, in the forests of fall and down winter and spring for years. Then one day I was walking along Tinker Creek thinking of nothing at all and I saw the tree with lights in it. I saw the backyard cedar where the morning doves roost charged and transfigured, each cell buzzing with flame. I stood on the grass with lights in it, grass that was wholly fire, utterly focused and utterly dreamed. It was less like seeing than like being, for the first time seen, knocked breathless by a powerful glance. The flood of fire abated, but I am still spending the power. Gradually the lights went out in the cedar, the colours died, the cells un-flamed and disappeared. I was still ringing. I had been my whole life a bell, and never knew it until at that moment I was lifted and struck. I have since only very rarely seen the tree with lights in it. The vision comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it, for the moment when the mountains open and a new light roars in spate through the crack, and the mountains slam. (Dillard Pilgrim 33-4)

Every semester I read Annie Dillard’s chapter “Seeing” in A Pilgrim at Tinker Creek to my students, tracking masterfully and uncannily, as it does, the drawing curriculum. She sets up the chapter by describing Marius Von Senden’s Space and Sight, his chronicle of the post-operative insights of the first recipients of cataract operations, meticulously recording their visual perceptions as well as their struggles, fears, horrors and amazements. What is remarkable is that the effort required of these newly sighted people is parallel (precisely opposite in fact) to the struggles of those in my class who are newly acquiring drawing skills. The newly sighted see, although everything is a meaningless jumble much as Berkeley predicted, whereas those who want to draw struggle to see the world again in this way. Form unhinged from meaning, at least in part and for brief intervals, is what is necessary in order to see visual form clearly enough to be able to draw. Learning to draw is frequently framed as learning to see since Kimon Nicolaïdes’ 1930s publication The Natural Way to Draw became a classic of drawing methodologies and has continued to be used, although with some considerable
and warranted critique, as a basis for current drawing pedagogy. His method is based on widening and deepening sensory awareness in order to “see” newly. Honing sensory perception through blind contour and gesture drawings continues as a methodology common in drawing courses throughout North America.

Dillard’s seeing “the tree with lights in it” literally depends upon her paying attention to the spaces between the branches and leaves of the tree through which light shines, an example of another common drawing technique designed as a means of honing perception in studio drawing courses. Negative spaces or shapes, a technical term recognisable by any first year drawing student, are usually unseen and ignored and are the shapes created between the easily seen, nameable, positive forms or spaces–like leaves, and branches. In the visual plane they are of course equal and fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Unless they are given equal attention, the drawing will be frustratingly stereotypic and inaccurate. A real effort is required to see the unique particularity of each shape–negative and positive, a visual equivalent to deductive reasoning.

Of course Dillard’s passage also describes a remarkable and uncommonly deep experience of sense perception, affect, immediacy, final form, form unity, disinterestedness, and universality that is non-conceptual in nature, all terms connected with Kant’s Critique of Judgement. It also describes a visual stop. The disciplined “paying attention” that learning drawing skills cultivates entails suspending one’s perception for ever longer periods of time, cultivating focus and sustaining attentiveness, resisting names, words, ready-made forms, and the stereotypes that curtail looking. Moving prematurely into categorizing or formulations will instantly end this generative search. Perceptual abilities can be stretched just as reason can be honed. And in the suspension into the intense attentiveness of this wordless task, the ones drawing find themselves also unaware of time, entering the ecstatic territory of Csikszentmihali’s flow and Heidegger’s altered experience of time. Dillard’s description of encountering the “tree with lights in it” has an element of immediacy about it. The vision comes upon her in a flash, but expectation and long looking precedes the flash of recognition. Aesthetic theory has long focussed on the immediacy of the flash of recognition, but that does not acknowledge the long looking (10,000 hours of skills mastery, visual research, etc.) that is cultivated by visual artists or anyone nearing peak experiences such as Csikszentmihali describes. Honing perceptual awareness will not guarantee a
transforming experience of seeing such as Dillard’s “tree with lights in it.” However, walking around with a thick skin of habit and ingrained inattention will certainly guarantee nothing new will be “seen.” Paying attention, rather than learning to draw realistically, is the intent and is the key to cutting through the thick skin of inattention, presumption, preconception or stereotype, and opening the potential for an awakening.

Drawing then, quite radically becomes a re-enchantment of sight and the antidote to the limiting of sight to nothing but a mechanical role ushered in by Descartes’ *Dioptrics* in 1637. Drawing is the primary, if unlikely, methodology to reanimate sight, reclaim sight’s active receptivity, and challenge the now canonical Cartesian reframing of vision.

Dillard’s passage also evokes what Kant called the Sublime, an experience of the internal world described in the *Critique of Judgement* that seems to transcend sense experiences. Still “found in the mind . . . the sublime is that, the mere ability to think which shows a faculty of the mind surpassing every standard of sense” (Kant, anthologized in Ross 117). Kant locates the sublime within the Critique of Judgement, understanding it, along with beauty, to be separate from concepts and reason (Richmond in Richmond and Snowber 80). Not containable or generate-able by words, concepts or reason, and explicitly not connected to knowledge, this is, then, a place of unknowing. Especially for the artist this is a generative place. This kind of seeing is often the result of long looking. Here we again think of Gladwell’s 10,000-hour skill mastery (Gladwell 35-68), although when it arrives it is always a surprise. But perhaps besides being a place of unknowing, the sublime is a profound return to sensory perception rather than the surpassing of sense. Contrasting deep seeing with ordinary sight, Dillard observes:

> But there is another kind of seeing that involves a letting go. When I see this way I stand transfixed and emptied. When I see this way I see truly. As Thoreau says, I return to my senses…The effort is really a discipline requiring a lifetime of dedicated struggle; it marks the literature of saints and monks of every order East and West, under every rule and no rule, discalced and shod…The secret of seeing is, then, the pearl of great price.

*(Dillard *Pilgrim* 1974)*

When students learn to draw they return to their senses, learning to focus their perceptual abilities, experiencing an intense attentiveness that ultimately does result in
them seeing more clearly and drawing more accurately, but while they are in process, paying attention manifests itself in self-forgetfulness. Unselfconsciousness is the experience of all those who seriously practice this discipline. Polanyi’s notion of indwelling the tool (Polanyi 59) is a helpful concept in understanding this process from the inside. Those who draw all recognize the moment the drawing tool is indwelt: the awareness of the self extends to include the tool, then continues as one becomes unselfconscious, and thereafter one draws usually at a level of expertise not possible before this level at attentiveness is achieved. The same happens with perception. When sight is indwelt the linear awareness of time melts away; awareness of the self recedes and the student’s drawings reach a new level of clarity and insightfulness. When one is unselfconscious, the self, with its multiple, complex grids of gender, sexuality, culture, etc., fall away. And when drawing a figure, another human body, the “other” is attended to, with less of the visual prejudice that comes from living in this visually bombarded culture. When sight is indwelt and the awareness of self loosens its grip, what becomes possible is recognizing, in every person, the ‘givenness’ of the body for “the body is the most palpable sign we have of the givenness of human existence” (Eagleton 166). We see that everyone is in fact amazingly made, and is beautiful, not just those who happen to fit the media profile of the month. One draws not because one can see but in order to see. Betty Edwards, whose method draws from and popularized Nicolaide’s work, recounts in *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain* how a student remarked to her after a semester of drawing, “Now everyone looks beautiful” (Edwards 5). Drawing is a visual way of de-reifying perception, cutting through visual prejudice created by the flood of images designed by consumerist global multinationals to create desire, but which distort what it means to be human.

Appelbaum points out that there is an actual moment; he calls it the moment of poise, which is familiar to all artists, athletes, and users of tools that I also experience and observe students discovering in the moment just prior to putting the pencil to the page. Appelbaum explains,

> To use an implement with intelligence somehow relies on a gathering of attention in the moment before we use the implement. An active concentration of awareness—the poise before movement—again is the

---

26 Recognizing might be understood as a kind of re cognizing or re cognition, a re thinking of what is—through perception.
stop. The stop lives in the interstices of action, an ordinary recluse. It shuns the spotlight yet exerts a definite and important control over what takes place. Furthermore, it gives us a key to a deeper engagement in a meaning that unfolds our lives. For it offers a choice. Either to remain habit-bound, or to regain a freedom in one’s approach to an endeavour.

(Appelbaum xi)

Like Michael Polanyi’s notion of indwelling the tool, attentiveness is gathered, collected and concentrated, directing it into and through the tool, including it within our perceptual field like an extension of our own bodies. Drawing becomes a concrete practice of philosophy, what artist Gerhard Richter describes as “a kind of applied epistemology” (Richter and Obrist 68). Whether described as indwelling or as poise, this gathering of attentiveness utterly changes the outcome. Paying attention in drawing requires an intense concentration, indwelling and direction of perception that very occasionally returns us to our senses in a profound way.
Paying Attention

It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists.
(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus 88*)

Figure 4. *Phoenix Heart*, 8” x 16”, encaustic, graphite, steel, gold leaf

Once stopped, a turn in awareness is necessary. Once stopped, mindful attention is called for. Once the old desensitized thinking/seeing has been stopped, it must give way to a re-sensitized concentration of attention, focussing and sustaining with real desire for its own sake and not for any instrumental goal. I experience aesthetics and art-making as verbs, active practices of mindful awareness, intentional forms of paying attention. It is attention that the stop makes space for, mindful awareness that enables halting extensions into the unknown. It is the quality of attention that inaugurates waking up. Appelbaum suggests gathering and concentrating awareness\(^\text{27}\); Polanyi recommends indwelling, extending awareness outward\(^\text{28}\); for Dillard attentiveness is the “secret of

\(^{27}\) Appelbaum calls this gathering of awareness the poise.

\(^{28}\) I am referring to Polanyi’s famous phrase of indwelling the tool.
seeing” (Dillard Pilgrim 33), the "pearl of great price.” (33) And Simone Weil, an advocate of radical attentiveness, considers honing attention the real reason for studying anything29 (Weil Waiting 49-60). Practices of attention slow the process of thinking, extend it, and prevent perceptions from closing prematurely into concepts or categories. For Wittgenstein, thinking was to be slowly savoured; for Weil as well, thinking and perception were to be slowed down. “We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them but by waiting for them” (56-57).

Educational theorist Karen Meyer describes the practice of awareness as what prompted her to develop Living Inquiry. Meyer situates her methodology within the daily-ness of Being-in-the-world30 and acknowledges how difficult it is to be present to that which is closest to us. She quotes Krishnamurti, speaker and writer on philosophical and spiritual topics, who proposes:

> the act of seeing what is (opposed to what should be, or what was) occurs only when this movement of thought is absolutely still. In silence the mind is free from the known with its accumulations, divisions, and severe conditioning. He called such awareness ‘intelligence’, whereby the mind becomes highly active and sensitive to what it’s doing, what goes on in daily life, and what happens in times of inattention. (Meyer n. pag.)

For Karen Meyer, attentive awareness is described as a clearing, a momentary opening into the world as it is. Drawing on Heidegger, clearings make disclosure possible and allow the emergence of presence. She asks what “awareness as a clearing brings before prejudiced eyes—those ready-made interpretations that otherwise happen behind our backs” (Meyer n. pag.). Ready-made interpretations can then be seen through and dislodged. Quoting Heidegger, Meyer describes awareness “as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises” (n. pag.). Awareness and attentiveness allows for clarity in multiple manifestations of being-in-the-world. By honing attentiveness in the studio, seeing is reframed as expectant, as active receptivity. Moments of clearing open up, ready-made interpretations dissolve away, and something new is revealed.

29 In a short essay “On the Proper Use of School Studies,” Weil identifies attention as the primary capacity whose development and cultivation was the real reason why one studied anything.

30 See Heidegger Being and Time (1926) for his discussion of the unitary phenomenon of Being-in-the-world.
Attentiveness is honed and extended in a number of specific directions throughout the curricula of the typical four-year studio program at the tertiary level. In this second chapter I explore ways in which artists direct their active attentive perception. What is the object of their active receptivity? Making manifest happens through paying attention to materials, the body, theory, affect, imagination and the web of culturally mediated contexts. Aesthetic knowing is embodied, materialized, experienced and enacted through the material realm and through material signs. Aesthetics of any kind requires attention, invites the aware sensory perception that is accomplished with our eyes and our mind. Aesthetic attentiveness is an embodied affair as well as an imaginative one, paying attention to one’s interior, balancing affect, concept and percept, intuitions, sensory interoceptive and exteroceptive capacities, while equally paying attention outward, into the rich exterior web of cultural contextual realities.

But in the end, what really matters is paying attention.

**Materials**

How do you make something out there, material, separate from you, an object amongst other objects, somehow carry the feeling of being— for the viewer to somehow make a connection with it. In a way, where you ended in *Art and Illusion* is where I want to begin. That idea that in some way there are things that cannot be articulated, that are unavailable for discourse, which can be conveyed in a material way, but can never be given a precise word equivalent for. …I want to start where language ends.

(Gormley in conversation with Gombrich in Hutchinson 12)

Figure 5. *Fragments of your Ancient Name (Water)*, 15” x 60”, encaustic, steel, maps, MRI
Artist Statement

We are inescapably materially embodied creatures. The core of my visual research practice explores how materials such as wax, paper, steel, lead, ash and gold can be juxtaposed with the material body to create and complicate meaning. I layer encaustic over graphite drawings and a variety of images on paper (such as PET scans, navigational charts, maps or texts) then juxtapose planes of materials with these figurative encaustic surfaces. Discovering the potency of materials has been exhilarating. Steel, wax, gold, and lead all carry meanings, are coded with significance ranging from precious to toxic and when paired with the figure heighten a corporeal reading of the figure. Medical images map the body’s interior and a variety of maps and texts, similarly encoded with layers and levels of cultural significance, collide in unexpected chaotic potentialities of meaning making. The meaning of body unravels over these various signs and materials, all culturally and geographically located. We are each alive in our own skins and fragile, material beings. It is in attending to and honoring this miraculous, unexplainable, material existence that occasionally in unexpected moments, something is opened and realized, glimmers of meaning beyond words, made manifest. Spirituality and materiality are of one piece, unavoidably connected. To avoid, deny or denigrate material existence is to turn from what we are given. Spirituality is embedded at a cellular level into the material realm and it is in plunging into the material that the liminal is recognized.

If Aesthetics’ chief characteristic is its capacity to enact a waking up and if with Wittgenstein (along with generations of artists from every art form) we believe that what is most important in life cannot be spoken but can be made manifest, then the embodied material realm is the primary source of astonishment and focus of that concentrated attentiveness. Most famously amongst dancers is Isadora Duncan’s statement “If I could say it in words I would not be dancing,” but versions of this statement exist amongst painters and sculptors of all ages. Picasso painted Guernica: he did not write a speech or join a political movement to convey his horror and opposition to warfare. But this sentiment sounds more startling when voiced by a philosopher. It was Wittgenstein’s position that what is most important in life simply couldn’t be stated using discursive or propositional language, being outside the structure of what language does. Visual art
makes manifest what is unavailable for discourse, what cannot be articulated. Art does this through the embodied material realm, nowhere else but in one’s own skin, in and through the body, and nowhere else but in this present time, this present context, history and place in the world. Art makes manifest by looking around at what is and by, as I have already suggested (and will explore in greater depth later on) plunging into the liminal unknown. Art starts, as Gormley, Wittgenstein and hosts of artist from every century suggest, where discursive language ends. This by no means suggests that art does not utilize words or theories, or that art does not function like a language itself, however—simply that art extends beyond what discursive text can convey. In extending beyond discursive text, what is happening? Aesthetics certainly uses reason and thought, but in addition what is practiced is a radical, open receptivity, re-inhabiting sensory perceptual data, suspending and extending closure, practicing active attentiveness, widening mindful awareness, listening and paying attention in a number of directions. In this section, I describe aesthetics and art-making as forms of mindful and focused paying attention. I ask to what aesthetics and art-making pay attention in order to make manifest.

One night a moth flew into the candle, was caught, burnt dry, and held. I must have been staring at the candle, or maybe I looked up when a shadow crossed my page; at any rate, I saw it all. A golden female moth, a biggish one with a two-inch wingspan, flapped into the fire, dropped her abdomen into the wet wax, stuck, flamed, frazzled and fried in a second. Her moving wings ignited like tissue paper, enlarging the circle of light in the clearing and creating out of the darkness the sudden blue sleeves of my sweater, the green leaves of jewelweed by my side, the ragged red trunk of a pine. At once the light contracted again and the moth’s wings vanished in a fine foul smoke. At the same time her six legs clawed, curled, blackened and ceased, disappearing utterly. And her head jerked in spasms, making a spattering noise; her antennae crisped and burned away and her heaving mouthparts crackled like pistol fire. When it was all over, her head was, so far as I could determine, gone, gone, the long way of her wings and legs. Had she been new, or old? Had she mated and laid her eggs, had she done her work? All that was left was the glowing horn of her abdomen and thorax—a fraying, partially collapsed gold tube jammed upright in the candle’s round pool.

And then this moth-essence, this spectacular skeleton, began to act as a wick. She kept burning. The wax rose in the moth’s body from her soaking abdomen to her thorax to the jagged hole where her head should be, and widened into flame, a saffron-yellow flame that robed her to the ground like any immolating monk. That candle had two wicks, two flames of
identical height, side by side. The moth’s head was fire. She burned for two hours, until I blew her out. (Dillard Holy the Firm 16-17)

Once meaning is loosed from its propositional shackles, a cascade of possibilities tumbles before us. As will unfold in the pages that follow, we are faced with the probability that the visual material realm that we are surrounded by, that we are bombarded with and that we routinely ignore, forms us and can heal us; that we can harness this energy to construct or deconstruct, to subvert, complicate or clarify; that visuals are a form of intelligence and are in short a active epistemology. We know a lot more than we can tell. Halting, hinting, mute, permeable, partial, blinking disbelief, shifting purpose and point, this epistemology honours unknowing, is an apophatic\textsuperscript{31} way. Dillard explains her moth analogy pages after she introduces this startlingly violent metaphor. Artists work jammed in a pool of materials, in the bright wick of the mind, and in the fires of the spirit, she says. I understand from her metaphor that the wick’s line (the mind) is not the only means to understanding, being itself rooted in wax (material), a flame resides on wick and moth’s hollow shell (material including specifically the body), two flames having identical heights. Knowing can be made manifest, can be embodied, experienced and enacted through the material realm and through material signs.

Form and recalcitrant material are in fact necessary to make sense of things. Friedrich Schiller considered the mind’s ability to create order from chaos and regarded form as the basis for making sense of things—what he called the formal impulse.

To the fulfilment of this twofold task, of bringing what is necessary \textit{within} us to reality, and subjecting what is real \textit{outside us} to the law of necessity, we are urged by two contrary forces, which, because they impel us to realize their object, are very properly called impulses. (Schiller 64)

The formal impulse is shown in, and is necessary to, our ability to conceptualize, perceive, and create imagery and beauty” (Richmond Art’s Educational Value 96). We are impelled to order, organize, and come to insight regarding our inner and outer worlds through form and with materials. Material beings that we are, we see divergent interconnections and from passionate excitement, something is kindled and is pressed

\textsuperscript{31} Apophatic, or the “way of unknowing” as it is sometimes referred to, is a term that relates to the belief that God can be known to humans only in terms of what God is not (such as ‘God is unknowable’). wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn In this case I use it to refer to the insufficiency of words, and the fluidity of knowing in general.
out, given expression and concrete form through the material realm. “Unless there is con-
pression nothing is ex-
pressed.” (Dewey 69)

Meaning can be materialized (given form) with almost anything. Nearly anything at hand will do--graphite, clay, cathode tube, pigment, ash, lead, maps, receipts, white folding chairs, Nike running shoes, definitions, x-rays, wood, tar, fog machines, digital signals, sound waves, space, time… Meaning is made manifest within recalcitrant, often unpredictable, always elusive, ordinary material matter. But one makes a grave error if one thinks the materiality in an artist’s process is some sort of a blank slate onto which an artist imposes his/her meanings. For Dewey “The work is formed matter” (Dewey 118) but matter is already filled with meaning and is no blank slate. Listen to artist Andy Goldsworthy: “I take nothing out with me in the way of tools, glue or rope, preferring to explore the natural bonds and tensions that exist within the earth… Each work is a discovery.”

Materials are wildly untameable, not to be underestimated or left out of one’s calculations. They are themselves part of the unpredictability of being an artist and command respect. One collaborates with one’s materials. And loves them. And follows where they lead. Even though an artwork is an object of design and starts with fully formed intentions, the most exciting things happen when intentions are extended beyond and something surprising happens. In increments, letting go of the vision that generated the courage to begin working in the first place, says Dillard, and replacing it with what it is becoming, seemingly independent of your will, a real object in the material world that you have never seen before, you do not recognise but nonetheless you nurture to life. Materials are one of the things you attend to—that you probe with, as Dillard suggests gently, searching with the delicacy of a worm—and trust while in the abyss.

In the studio. Went to Welding and Engineering today, a cement truck fabrication plant off Terminal drive in Vancouver. It is in the light industrial area close to the VIA train station and the infamous Main street strip of seedy hotels and addicts pawning every conceivable product in the alley behind the hotels. The steel workers thought I was crazy as I carefully paged through 8’ x 4’ plates of 12 and 16 gauge steel out in their yard. I am stunned, and made speechless by the heat generated watermark patterns etched into the mill scale on the surface of the steel. I was thinking of using the steel as a negative symbol of industrialization but this notion is being transformed in front of my eyes by the material’s sheer beauty. I learn that the steel is itself very sensitive, a hand-print placed on unsealed steel
will etch into it, emerging inexorable as a rusted shape over the coming month. Human etched steel. The more attentive I am to the steel the more my idea is transformed and if I am wise I will follow the material rather than imposing my original and admittedly superficial idea onto it. The discovery of this material is exhilarating. Materials carry meaning. And therefore the meaning of body is extended over steel, wax, ash, and lead, meanings ranging from precious to toxic. Pairing the figurative encaustic planes with the steel I feared would be confining but the play with and against gravity, with and against the boundaries and limits of the steel is oddly not confining the figure but freeing it somehow. The structure seems somehow the antidote to the overly lush, organic surface that was bothering me so much previously. The materials themselves are the means of instruction and the work seems stronger by attending to this.

Materials themselves carry an internal physical intelligence, and are encoded with layers of culturally specific meanings that ‘speak’ independently of the artist. “When I’m working with materials it’s not just the leaf or the stone; it’s the processes that are behind them that are important. That’s what I’m trying to understand, not a single isolated object but nature as a whole.” Goldsworthy does not impose meaning but releases it. The same process is at play when Vancouver First Nations artist Brian Jungen appropriates Nike running shoes and reforms them into a replica of traditional first nations ceremonial masks, releasing a more culturally located meaning or, as I discovered, working with steel and more recently have discovered working with sheepskins.
Everything exceeds its name, [says Tim Lillburn] insofar as the named world is coterminous with the finite world, everything is infinite. The weight of everything, its home, where it is itself, lies beyond naming, lives outside the range of calculation, is not, if to be is to possess a name. The mysterium of the physical world is a theophany of what is not there, that is beyond the calibrations of that erect ‘thereness’. Thus as John Scotus Erigena says, ‘no substance or essence of any creation, whether visible or invisible, can be comprehended by the intellect or by reason as to what it is.’ (Lilburn as quoted by Zwicky 53R)

For Canadian poet Tim Lillburn (who echoes the 8th century Irish mystic who voices a similar realization) materials are beyond naming. Wittgenstein remarked in the Tractatus near the end of his 6th proposition that “It is not how things are in the world that is mystical, but that it exists” (Wittgenstein 88). In Culture and Value he describes the ordinariness of life as being made significant by artists, “capturing the world sub specie aeternitatis,32” [and that] man has to awaken to wonder--and so perhaps do peoples. Science is a way of sending him to sleep again” (Wittgenstein Culture 5e) But both art

32 Sub specie aeternitatis means roughly “from the vantage point of eternity”.
and science are rooted first of all in curiosity and wonder, and Carl Sagan\textsuperscript{33}, Wendal Berry\textsuperscript{34} and Lynn Fels– in her work with Karen Meyer\textsuperscript{35}, have all in their own ways reintegrated science and various art-making practices. Wittgenstein says the artist can help show, can help make manifest and that “A poet's words can pierce us” (Wittgenstein as quoted by Zwicky 55R). In my experience, art uses the already miraculous material realm to release meaning in just this visceral, embodied manner.

As Dewey said, art “does something different from leading to an experience. It constitutes one” (88). But this can work in multiple ways. The artist enacts an experience for the viewer but can also be acted upon by the materials. Non-linear, associative, divergently drawing on ideas across disciplinary subjects, integrating subsidiary awarenesses, ranges of conceptual, sensory information and untameable, material itself contributes to making sense of things and leads to acts of discovery. Meaning-making need not happen in language, or rather it can erupt in any language, a visual material one no less than a textual one. Meaning is realized, is enacted through the process of working with materials and is received actively by an equally complex embodied viewer; meaning is not read, in short, but is negotiated, experienced, a more indeterminate, porous and permeable ‘text’ open to the associative input of the equally complex viewer. The spectator brings her own material embodied existence to the interpretive table, adding to the creative act, acknowledging also the presence of synaesthesia between spectator and presented artwork. Art, like language, is involved in a triadic relationship between artist, object, and spectator, a quadratic relationship if one considers the context separate from the artist, spectator and work of art. In this complex interlayered four-dimensional interaction between artwork, maker, receiver and context, multiple meanings are realized and welcomed.

The point is that ordinary materials are never mundane, that within the material realm is so much more than we can ever grasp, ever contain with intellect alone, although it must be said that what the intellect extracts is not to be diminished. Aristotle understood

\textsuperscript{33} Astrophysicist who lived from 1934-1996 famous for popularizing science based on wonder and inquisitiveness.

\textsuperscript{34} Born in 1934, Berry is a prolific writer, academic, cultural and economic critic and farmer fueled in his work by environmental science and concerns.

\textsuperscript{35} When drama and storytelling were invited into the science classroom what emerged was Fels’ doctoral dissertation and performative inquiry, an arts-based research methodology that understands drama as research and sees all arts as action sites of inquiry and knowledge creation.
knowledge as a deep honouring of concrete material existence. Material's meaning was innately proclaimed through its form in much the same way as the oak tree proclaims the nature of an acorn. Wisdom can be expressed and knowing can be arrived at in a multitude of ways, through numerous wicks. The layers adhering to material can spark symbolic recreation of feelings and can evoke ideology and discourse, can denote a literal meaning or connote the layers and complex associations of cultural and historical meanings. Deeply influenced by Aristotle's thought, philosopher Martha Nusbaum insists that "style itself makes its claims" (Nussbaum 3). Form and material (whether literary or literal) proclaim a philosophical content. Material and form, by their careful selection, convey the content they wish to announce.

I do not use materials as much as pay attention to them and through them, and in turn, after a lifetime of working, materials exert their pressure, forming me. I begin to think through and with materials, trusting their resonant call, perusing what I do not understand. I seek to inhabit and indwell materials, using them as an extension to ask questions with and as a site of investigation. I follow where they lead. "Cell by cell, molecule by molecule, atom by atom, part of the brain changes physical shape to accommodate and fit paint," Dillard assures her reader in response to artist Paul Klee’s assertion that the artist is servant to her materials (Dillard, Writing Life 69). All materials are thus and most artists intuitively understand this. Dillard says that the materiality of an artist's life cannot be exaggerated. Regarding words, her own material, she explains, "You write it all, discovering it at the end of the line of words. The line of words is a fiber-optic, flexible as wire; it illumines the path just before its fragile tip. You probe with it, delicate as a worm" (7). Jammed in a pool of materials, artists similarly probe, delicately, carefully, stuck in the abyss with no hope of knowing and no words. Meaning is made manifest by trusting the frustratingly obstinate, recalcitrant, miraculous material world.

---

36 Paul Klee, who lived from 1879-1940 was an artist whose paintings and writings influenced the development of modern art. Along with Kandinsky, he taught at the Bauhaus in Germany.
The Body

Figure 6. Around the Shape of My Heart, animated gif. projected onto steel

Who knew there was that much going on inside—all the time! Sarah has just walked into my studio and I am showing her the animated gif of my angiograph and angioplasty. She has come wondering about investing the last of her student loan into buying a video camera. I say to her “now is the time, throw everything, invest all you have into your work.” I take these words to heart, having only recently had the courage to put the thumb drive into my computer and open the files. Even after 30 years I find myself oddly terrified starting new work. But ideas call out to be made. Keep tugging at you internally, insisting. They are huge files but only a couple of seconds each. There it is—my heart, moving—the clip shows the dye filling the arteries around my heart, absent/present, the heart is not actually visible just the arteries filling, in motion—being becoming visible around the shape of my heart. “So amazing—so phenomenally beautiful!” They said they had never seen anyone quite so high while having an angiograph. It was my second and I was conscious this time round. “Look, everything is in movement—everything is so dynamic, there is so much life. Who knew there was so much activity, so much going on inside of everyone all the time…

We are embodied. We taste and touch, hear, smell and think, all through our material bodies. We are ourselves material and the task of the artist is to make something that is also material, something in the material world, beyond words, another material object, that somehow carries an inchoate, dimly sensed, hardly hinted at charge of being. We have complex, multi-layered interior as well as exterior worlds. We are situated bodies,
embodied within languages, cultures, histories, contexts, and communities. We are subjects constantly negotiating, forming and being formed by a vast ocean of sensory data, intellectual influences, powerful cultural currents, societal and historical tides, tacit and explicit swells, conscious and unconscious perceptual undercurrents, emotions, intuitions, thoughts, memories, actions and dreams. And out of this web we make things.

All we ‘know’ is mediated through the body. Amongst artists perhaps dancers know this the best. In the field of arts education Celeste Snowber theorizes through the body, naming the “entire body as a receptive space” (Snowber in Richmond and Snowber 31) and a place of paradox (32). She invites the poetics of embodiment identifying “an attitude of the heart, a presence of the body, a return to seeing” (31-33). This is not solipsism but simply recognition that the body is all we have. Thought is not separable from brain, nerve endings, synapse, or dendrites, all are part of the body, having material existence and enabling thought. Richard Shusterman observes that for all the focus on sense perception within Baumgarten and Kant, aesthetics is seen by both as a function of the mind: therefore, both ignore the body in their account of aesthetics. Shusterman fills this lack by conceptualizing Somaesthetics.

We humanist intellectuals generally take the body for granted because we are so passionately interested in the life of the mind and the creative arts that express the human spirit. But the body is not only an essential dimension of our humanity, it is also the basic instrument of all human performance, our tool of tools, a necessity for all our perception, action, and even thought...We need to think more carefully through the body in order to cultivate ourselves and edify our students because true humanity is not a mere genetic given but an educational achievement in which body, mind, and culture must be thoroughly integrated. (Shusterman Thinking Through the Body 2)

The body is our tool of tools, necessary for all action, perception and thought, for all knowing, acting and meaning-making. We think through our bodies, integrating mind, body and culture in order to reach the educational achievement Schusterman describes as true humanity. He draws on Husserl, Heidegger and Merlow-Ponty, whose investigations started with envisioning a “science of experience,” rooted in lived, felt immediacy. Merleau-Ponty radicalized Husserl’s beginnings by locating the living, breathing, attentive body itself as being the subject of perceptual experience and describing science as a second-order expression of one’s basic experience of the world (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p.viii). Nietzsche made a connection, widely recognised from
Aristotle’s time to now, when he maintained that his creative energy flowed most freely when his muscular activity was greatest. When I swim, immersing and moving my material body, my brain functions better; synapses fire and serotonin is produced (a decidedly bodily event); connections are realized; cognitive discoveries made. Conversely, a sleepless night renders my brain and body foggy, awkward and sluggish; a good idea cannot materialize due to my very subjective bodily state. We can analyse these phenomena but they are, first and foremost, my experiences. For Merleau-Ponty, knowing and perceiving is a bodily affair. It is vital “not to explain the world as if from outside, but to give voice to the world from our experienced situation within it, recalling us to our participation in the here-and-now, rejuvenating our sense of wonder” (Abram 47). The body is seen not as a set of predetermined mechanisms but as an active, open system constantly adjusting and readjusting in relation to experiences–receptively and reciprocally. Just as the body is not a blank slate, material inanimate things are not seen as passive. They are described in the active voice. Hence a sympathetic relation exists between the perceiver and the perceived. Perception is a mutual interaction, “participation” with things entailing synaesthesia, a fusion of all the senses. Perception, as Merleau-Ponty describes it, is a heightening of awareness and an animation or re-sacralizing of the world (Abram).

The articulation of this sympathetic relation between the perceiver and perceived, with an attendant heightening of awareness and subjective response, is important since it resonates with experiences in the drawing studio and seems identical to the lived experiences of students even early on in learning drawing practices. Key to honing one’s visual capacities in the studio is heightening one’s embodied subjective awareness; learning to attend to what is expressed by each mark; watching for the embodied tell-tale signs of being deeply engaged with the drawing process, one of the most potent of which is an altered experience with time itself. The drawing curriculum is itself an apprenticeship in perception, giving freedom within certain bounds to explore, the directed honing of attentiveness heightens embodied awareness and results in an altered experience of time, taking the student beyond herself to attend to what is outside but not other. Attention opens a clearing and invests seeing with presence. Also reflective of Heidegger’s work is the experience of time as extraordinary, as extended or suspended and as “ecstatic.”
For Applebaum, re-inhabiting intentionally an embodied awareness is the secret of the Stop, key to awakening consciousness. The severing of sight from its embodied condition requires a reversal in order to release this potential:

The stop is a hinge between heaven and earth, awareness and the body. When it is swung one way, awareness becomes disembodied, disjointed, and disenchanted. When it is swung another, the body becomes mindless, reckless, and dispirited. When it is hinged properly, body and awareness, joined, reveal a way of working in harmony. (29)

Artists make manifest first and foremost by being attentive to themselves as material embodied beings, integrated wholes comprised of mind, body and spirit inextricably linked and interdependent. Only then can awareness be directed outwards and be discovered as a potent force capable of interrupting settled beliefs, false conceptions and stereotypic formulations.

Like an embodiment of Shusterman and Applebaum’s quest, all of artist Anthony Gormley’s work is based on exploring embodied sensory perception, literally with subject, form and content. Gormley materializes the sensation of the inner space of the body, externalizing the internal body in his figurative work that starts with a cast of his own body. After he is out of the mould, he reassembles it “re-appraising the thing I have been, the place that I have been to see how much potency it has” (Gormley in conversation with Gombrich in Hutchinson 18). This work externalizes in visual form normally mute internal interoceptive awareness (internal sensations). His recent work, Blind Light37, even more profoundly invites the viewer to experience proprioceptive perception (awareness of one’s body in space and in relation to itself) by enclosing the viewer in a space full of such dense fog that the viewer’s ordinary perception of herself is shifted radically. Like Applebaum’s blind man, visitors to Blind Light experience a heightening of exteroceptive awareness (of the senses). Interoceptive, proprioceptive and exteroceptive perception are all vital sources of normally ignored data, without which one cuts oneself off from rich veins of knowing.

Gormley, Applebaum and Shusterman, from their differing vantage points, all understand the import of widening embodied awareness and tapping sensory perception. Acknowledging somatic perception because it pays attention to what would otherwise be

37 Blind Light was exhibited at the Hayward Gallery in 2007
ignored is absolutely vital, but even more vital is that the body itself means something and influences all our meaning-making activities. Philosopher and influential literary analyst Julia Kristeva sees the logic of signification as already and always operating within the material body. “[T]he logic of language is already operating at the material level of bodily processes and that bodily drives make their way into language. She postulates that signifying practices are the result of material bodily processes. Drives make their way into language through the semiotic element of signification” (Kritzman, Reilly and DeBevoise 560). The body is not neutral. It is far more than material, being intimately linked with meaning-making, signifying practices that are a means of discharging bodily drives, linking soma and psyche, and operating between the biological and social.

The theory of meaning now stands at a crossroad; either it will remain an attempt at formalizing meaning systems by increasing sophistication of the logico-mathematical tools which enable it to formulate models on the basis of a conception (already rather dated) of meaning as the act of a transcendental ego, cut off from its body, its unconscious and also its history; or it will attune itself to the theory of the speaking subject…to biophysiological processes (themselves already inescapably part of signifying processes) …[and] to social constraints (family structures, modes of production, etc.). (Kristeva and Moi 28)

Kristeva contrasts a mathematically oriented Cartesian influenced theory of meaning with an embodied, perceptually alive theory of meaning that includes scope for a whole variety of art-making practices. Parallel to the work of educational theorists, Kristeva identifies a critical choice, a transition from meaning being the act of the transcendent ego to meaning being an act of a speaking subject, fully embodied, self aware and cognisant of context. For Kristeva “the semiotic is a prediscursive articulation, in the chaotic space of bodily functions” (Gutting 244) and identifies poetry and literature as being modes of expression particularly receptive to semiotic practices. Similarly, visual art-making practices engage in prediscursive articulation and are receptive to the semiotic practices of an embodied speaking subject that Kristeva, in concert with Appelbaum, Shusterman and others see as the critical missing element of a more robust theory of meaning. The body and its self-conscious somaticity play a decidedly irreplaceable part in aesthetic attentiveness.
The Ocean

The water was colder than expected.
   It startled, but not like our northern,
   nearly frozen, West coast normal.
   So transparent, aqua green, cut blue glass.
Glowing light, beneath dark grey sky.

Just like in my dream. Phosphorescent
   blue green waves. But I was pulling weeds on a
   dry prairie plane, ignoring gods dancing, laughing, in the waves
   till they, in exasperation, threw difficulty my way.
   Unwelcome diversion, I threw it back.
   Furious.

Chastened now, I enter the waves
   timid, always having been afraid of the ocean
   preferring, loving even, swimming within the safe borders
   of a pool. Cold at first, but warming perceptively as waves
   flow over already wet skin. Green and blue, gathering and releasing,
   surprisingly strong pull back.

I am a little tentative, making acquaintances
   slowly, feeling the surge, the sound, the burning air.
Gradually water warms, dissolves anxiety, relaxes, then unexpected seventh
   surge knocks me breathless, off my feet.

Laughing, sent back in mind and time,
   to Krydor Saskatchewan and Redberry Lake: the anomaly
   of a salt-water body in the middle of northern prairie heat. Running to the
   water, breathless, laughing, running barefoot, screaming delight in
   sand and gulls and waves. Burning sun overhead.

This time, with my own children,
   laughing at my awkwardness, bowled over.
Letting go to water, leaning back, buoyed
   up and over each salty surging swell.
How scary these surges felt while standing.
   Surprising how, once knocked over,
   how supportive, gentle, they feel.
   How grateful I am to discover
   leaning back, how effortlessly
   the water holds me.
Sitting at the water’s edge I
let the waves break over me.
Lying back, my body imprints in sand,
weight released. Sun hot on shoulders warming
flesh chilled from a long, cold, rainy, distant winter.\(^{38}\) (Grimm, 2008)

Despite aesthetics’ rich history and complex ontological implications, it is often reduced, dismissively, to an investigation of feelings. And feelings have a long history of dismissal. From the context of the 21\(^{st}\) C contemporary art world’s high-powered biennales, prestigious prizes, high stakes auctions, curators, critics and collectors, connecting art with feelings might be viewed as simplistic. However the Greek word aesthetics, besides referring to perception, also refers to feelings; anaesthetic, besides being put to sleep, also indicates, “not feeling” (Townsend 118). Affects are a critical part of the a priori conditions of the mind that Kant considers in the Critique of Judgement to ground reason and practical judgements. Aesthetics is to feel fully.

In stark contrast to this longstanding dismissal of affect, Martha Nussbaum accounts for the power of affect to correct reason in her essay Love’s Knowledge. In it she reverses the usual story of the way things work, explaining how the shock of pain can produce powerful instantaneous realizations of the truth of a situation, pointing out that reason can construct false façades. Feelings can be ignored, blocked, frozen or denied; the truth of a situation can be overridden by reason. She describes cataleptic knowing as the ability of emotions to cut through the illusions that reason can erect. As already discussed, Nussbaum looks to Aristotle’s work in Nicomachean Ethics to locate the emotions and imagination as vital means by which rationality is completed (Nussbaum, 261-285). Having full access to emotional knowing is a means to full rationality. But where did dismissal of emotions come from in the first place?

Besides dismissing sensory perception, Plato also distrusted emotion, accusing emotions as capable of leading philosophy astray. For Plato the visual was dangerous, drawing on emotion to fuel its persuasive power: it was inaccurate being three times

\(^{38}\) The visual form of this poem echoes the ripples of water on the surface of the ocean by the one space indentation on every other line. The ends of the lines create wave shapes that increase in size. There are seven stanzas, mirroring the pattern of seven waves, each increasing in size.
removed from ideal Form. It leads astray, away from rather than towards truth. Plato’s picture of the way things are, particularly because it was so convincingly drawn, has had enormous influence over a surprising number of decisions to this day. Aristotle, on the other hand, believed “Without feeling, a part of correct perception is missing” (79).

Aristotle tells us in no uncertain terms that people of practical wisdom, both in public and in private lives, will cultivate emotion and imagination in themselves and in others, and will be very careful not to rely too heavily on a technical or purely intellectual theory that might stifle or impede these responses.

(Aristotle 82)

Aristotle believed that even a correct act, carried out grudgingly without feeling or sympathy, might not really be virtuous at all. Affect and action mutually support one another.

Affect refers to the wide range of feelings, not just pleasurable or simplistic ones. To feel fully, one must attend and inquire into them all. In my poem that opened this section about swimming in the ocean in Mexico, the dream predicts “difficulty being thrown my way”—a catalytic event. The unexpected seventh surge that knocks me off my feet is a metaphor for this unwelcome difficulty. Sometimes aesthetics can knock us off our feet, inviting us to pay attention and see more clearly.

Experiences such as these need to be held within one’s perception, attended to with intensity, curiosity and courage. Like Martha Nussbaum, Simone Weil valued difficult experiences. In particular she saw a vital role for an extremely negative experience she named as affliction. In the affect of affliction and in our response to beauty she identified a potent power, saying: “There are only two things piercing enough to penetrate our souls in this way; they are beauty and affliction” (Weil 467). She believed them to be the most potent forces available with which life educates the heart and mind; they are, by Nussbaum’s definition, instances of catalytic knowing. She would count them as likely candidates to cut through the thick skin of presumption, counter an onrushing momentum of habit, focus attention, and contribute to full rationality. In short, affect, and

39 A contemporary reading of Plato’s works may well reveal that Plato was himself more nuanced and less dualistic than a previous generation’s interpretation of his texts, but the reading of Plato’s epistemology that I have sketched, possibly far from what Plato himself actually believed, has had a long legacy influencing budgets, the academy, artists and curricula today. See Stuart Richmond, “Art Education as Aesthetic Education A Response to Globalization,” Canadian Review of Art Education 29.1 (63); and E. Eisner, “Art and Knowledge,” Handbook of the Arts in Qualitative Research: Perspectives, Methodologies, Examples, and Issues., ed. A. Cole and J. Knowles (3).
affliction are necessary in order to account for the power of aesthetics. Weil further understands the interconnected role of the body with affect:

Through joy, the beauty of the world penetrates our soul. Through suffering it penetrates our body. We could no more become a ship’s captain by joy alone than one becomes a ship’s captain by studying books on navigation. The body plays a part in all apprenticeships.

(Weil 450)

Similarly, for aesthetics to be the province of beauty and pleasure alone would be incomplete and would rob aesthetics of a primary source of its capacity to move, inspire, change, stop, and wake us up.

Emotions fuel art-making and rationality, are active, require a response, produce an energy that must be put to use, one way or another. The energy will do a work internally, literally lodging in gut or shoulders, or can be used intentionally with intelligence and skill. Transforming this energy is what John Dewey describes as expression as opposed to discharge (Dewey 82) and as the objectification of emotion. For Susan Langer the form an artist creates is an analogue for the feelings that human beings experience. Visual form is significant in so far as it creates a “pattern, or logical form, of sentience” (Langer 27). Through form, what language is ill-suited to communicate can be shown. Following the work of Wittgenstein and Cassirer, Langer saw art as primarily expressive of “not feelings and emotions the artist has, but feelings which the artist knows” (Eisner 7). For Langer, viewing artwork is more of a “direct traffic with intuition” (394), its import being inseparable from its form. It is. It means, but the feeling is not a separable content. Artwork does not “say” intentionally, but “shows,” does not communicate, as such, but reveals. Feeling and emotion alone do not constitute art. Expressiveness is not just discharging emotion but the disciplined use of the “visual language”, the elements, principles, and theories of art. For Leonard Cohen confession by itself is uninteresting, but confession filtered through a tradition of skill and hard work is a very different matter. 40 Art is the crystallization, refinement and intensification of everyday experiences that do not just refer to experiences but constitutes one (Dewey 37- 59, 88). Ideas and feelings are made manifest in form.

---

40 In a CBC Inside the Music interview aired Sunday Feb. 5, 2012.
“Anger, joy, disease, exhilaration, freedom.” Consistently and cross culturally, students see a remarkable collective connection between their spontaneous markings to each word I announce. Every semester, I inevitably observe that analogue drawings are a revelation to students and are the hinge for their understanding composition and nonrepresentational form’s ability to spark meanings while still being permeable and flexible, a Wittgensteinian family resemblance, a guide but not a precise proof or rule. I still think about the student who said “I have never felt happiness.” We are ourselves material and respond in like manner to gravity. It is as true today as when Susanne Langer wrote in her 1953 publication, Feeling and Form, that visual form creates a logical pattern of sentience for emotions that people know. This logical pattern of sentience is understood immediately; much like the common “deep structure” that linguist Noam Chomsky believes is at the root of all languages. As I announce the words and witness the students’ visual responses, form’s “deep structure” materializes every semester. But even so, because there are no rules and as each student progresses, they each will realize their own unique way to analogously express what is within them. Emotion is objectified; expressiveness occurs as something we know is formed and materialized, crystallized through using the visual language with intelligence and skill.

Imagination

“Somewhere between chance and mystery lies imagination” a character in Luis Bunuel’s film The Milky Way says, and paying attention to the imagination is the vital process by which artists extend knowing into unknown territory. But the imagination is commonly viewed as an even larger impediment to rationality than affect is, Nussbaum, however insists that imagination holds an invaluable role for ethical choice in both private and public contexts and again looks to Aristotle’s epistemology. Necessary to memory and full perception of the particular, Aristotle understood imagination as necessary to “focus on absent experienced items in their concreteness, and even to form new combinations, not yet experienced, from items that have entered sense-experience” (Nussbaum 77). Furthermore, imagining outcomes allows us to choose ethically, planning forward or avoiding the imaginative view. Finally Aristotle believed understanding to be a function of the imagination, linking sequences of perceptions into a unity. In Releasing the Imagination Maxine Greene (Greene 17-31) talks of the imagination’s role in envisioning
beyond fixed, observable, common sensible, ordinary understandings, to a reality that is yet to be. In ethics—in order to envision a better future and in art-making to make something that was not there before—imagination is an essential capacity. Both Green and Dewey believe that the imagination, more than any other human capacity, is required in order to break through stereotype and inertia of habit. Without the capacity for imagining another way of life, Greene suggests, nothing new can shift or happen. This holds for visual or social imagining; imagination creates the capacity to invent, envisioning other ways, other outcomes, and better futures. Only when we can envision another state of affairs can things happen or change. Green also sees art-making and the imagination as connected with dislodging the self, or decentering ourselves.

“Imagination may be a new way of decentering ourselves, of breaking out of the confinements of privatism and self-regard into a space where we can come face to face with others and call out, “Here we are” (Greene 31). Hence Greene sees imaginative capacities to be at the root of both moral choosing and aesthetics in so far as both involve action as well as thought and cannot happen without imagination. Art can move an individual or a society from sleepwalking to moments of awareness and intensified raised consciousness. Artists pay attention with their eyes and mind, but with their imaginations they pay attention into the unknown.

Kant identified a particularly important role for the free play of the imagination as the conduit between sensory-perceptual feelings, affect and rationality. He would recognise imagination as essential to understanding my poem of swimming in Mexico, and would approve of the instantaneous immediacy of understanding’s arrival that is also a part of Nussbaum’s description of cataleptic knowing. Kant might not have acknowledged that sense perception can be honed, but he did create a link between the senses and reason with the free play of the imagination. As Lyas interprets Kant, “the organization of random stimuli into perceived objects is the work of the imagination and the production of conceptual categorizations of those objects is the work of the understanding” (Lyas 25). Imagination is the conduit between the intuitive sensory realm and the intellectual realm of reason, engaging in free play between them. Kant describes the free play of mental powers as a swing put in motion by the spirit, enacted by the imagination, and uncontainable by language.

Spirit, in an aesthetical sense...is what puts the mental powers purposely into swing, i.e. into such a play as maintains itself and strengthens the
mental powers in their exercise...[these] representations of the imagination which occasion much thought...cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language. (Kant anthologized by Ross 132)

Kant here prefigures Wittgenstein’s later position regarding what is beyond language as well as Derrida’s recognition of philosophy’s fated attempt to encompass art with discursive definitions. In some understandings of Kant’s project the imagination (and by extension art) is called on to heal the split between mind and matter and reunify how we theorize human personality (Townsend 119). Aristotle recognised this quite some time ago. Kant’s ordered philosophy of what the mind is capable of knowing and judging did relieve empiricism and rationalism of the pressure to discredit the other as both are accounted for within their own spheres of expertise (Townsend 118), but most significantly, the *Critique of Judgement* investigates “what cannot be completely compassed and made intelligible by language,” what neither empiricism nor rationalism can account for. The imagination is necessary in order to pay attention to what cannot be made intelligible by language, empiricism or rationalism.

Appelbaum’s project in *The Stop* is based on the premise that an imbalance between percept and concept, as Kant himself warned, results in blindness.

Descartes, whose work contributed to a widespread devaluing of percept, also, somewhat surprisingly, recognises the value of the aesthetic tools of affect and imagination and how they connect with knowledge:

> It might seem strange that opinions of weight are found in the works of poets rather than philosophers. The reason is that poets wrote through enthusiasm and imagination; there are in us seeds of knowledge, as of fire in a flint; philosophers extract them by way of reason, but poets strike them out of imagination, and then they shine more bright.

*(Descartes as quoted by Appelbaum, frontispiece)*

Also compatible with Aristotle’s epistemology, Rudolf Arnheim sees art-making as an indivisible whole, considering imagination and affect to be inseparable from reason. He combined Gestalt psychology with art and visual perception, observing that art echoes the mind’s functioning: “The mind always functions as a whole. All perceiving is also thinking, all reasoning is also intuition, all observation is also invention...vision is not a mechanical recording of elements but rather the apprehension of significant structural
patterns” (Arnheim 5-6). Dewey too defends the necessary role of intelligence in producing artworks, naming thinking in terms of relationships of qualities as being of the same order as the manipulation of verbal and mechanical symbols which are, he says, comparatively easier to work with. “The idea that the artist does not think as intently and penetratingly as a scientific inquirer is absurd” (47). This reality is also acknowledged in the latter part of the Critique of Judgement. “For in every art some purpose must be conceived . . . otherwise it would be a mere product of chance . . . [Art-making] requires talent cultivated in the schools, in order to make such a use of this material as will stand examination by judgement” (Townsend 130). Ted Cohen points out that Kant is primarily referring to nature early in the Critique, but increasingly he “devotes more attention to the delicate balance between feeling and the conceptual order of understanding and reason in the case of art “(Cohen and Guyer 6).

Aesthetics and art-making require honing and extending sensory perception, trusting intuition, honouring affect as well as employing reason, parsing theory and cultivating practical reason, connecting it all with the free play of the imagination. Intimately linked, all are means of paying attention. Artists know through paying attention with the intellect, the senses, the emotions, the intuition and the imagination.

**Context**

Subjective experience exists within a broader frame of reference—global civilization. (Gormley)

We are not only bodies; we are situated bodies. And it must be acknowledged that we are situated in contexts dominated by increasingly complex visual fields. In the beginning of the 21st century in the Western world, despite Descartes’ distrust of perception and dismissal of sight, it is safe to say that we live in a visually bombarded culture unimaginably beyond what Plato or Aristotle in 348 B.C.E., Baumgarten or Kant in the 18th Century, or Wittgenstein a mere 60 years ago could have ever imagined. Manufactured images wrap around us, on walls, billboards, and computer screen, in books, institutions, galleries and homes. Screens are everywhere, in grocery stores, restaurants, coffee shops, community gyms, bars, hovering above gas pumps; screens, with their seductive and urgent visuals are everywhere. Screens are portable; hand-held,
they can accompany us anywhere, making ours truly an image or i-generation. Furthermore visuals are global, circulating through the global village via communication technologies, influencing identities, ideas and politics. In the Western world we increasingly negotiate life and create culture using images. Comparing our visual immersion with what visual images a medieval person (or even one’s own grandmother) might have seen in one day, it is surprising to think of the contrast. Perhaps most insistently, besides these ready-made images are the ones generated by our own visual screen, light generated, retina received, shifting instantly with each minute movement of the head. Images “part before me like the Red Sea and close again in silence, transfigured, wherever I look back,” wrapping round and filling, as Dillard points out, literally every space (Dillard 271). Visual fields surround us.

Not only do visual fields surround us, but visual images also form us (maker and viewer alike). Largely an unconscious process, knowing that visuals are powerful does not mitigate their powerful pull. For example, we know that Photoshop manipulations distort the images of models we see in magazines and on billboards but are still startled when ordinary individuals are presented on screen. First year drawing students routinely recreate these manipulations, creating drawings that resemble more closely the anatomically incorrect narrow neck, elongated legs, etc., than the human being they are looking at. When I was a student, drawings routinely looked more like the one drawing than the model posing. More devastating is many students’ heart-breaking heroically misguided re-creation of themselves into this unattainable image, attested to by skyrocketing rates of eating disorders on campuses across North America. The media blatantly exploit the fact that visuals form us, and legislation in France, the UK, the Netherlands and the US has been proposed mandating warning signs on advertisements that use digitally manipulated images of models. Freud’s mirror effect—that an image of another human being simulates a mirror encounter, explains in part how this happens. Rene Girard’s insight—that human beings are at their core mimetic, adds

41 This use of i-generation suggests the image-immersed nature of this generation while playing on the suite of products (i-pod, i-mac, i-phone…) produced by Apple.
42 I understanding culture as “the shared practices of a group, community, or society through which meanings are made out of the visual, aural, and textual world of representations and the ways that looking practices are engaged in symbolic and communicative activities” (Sturken and Cartwright 3).
43 This issue has been highlighted by the Self Esteem act in the US and highly popular Dove anti ads like Evolution and their Campaign For Real Beauty.
support to this theory. Looking at an image, we imitate. And this seems to be the case whether we are looking at a mirror or another living, breathing human being. This insight is not new. In his *Poetics* Aristotle called imitation natural, that “from childhood, one of his advantages over the lower animals being this, that he is the most imitative creature in the world, and learns first by imitation” (1448b). Therefore images of the body become significant because they influence identity construction. Bombarded by a certain type of digitally altered body in the media, one’s own body begins to look wrong. Every year of late, first year student drawings often document the shifting sands of what constitutes “normal.” These drawings are evidence of long looking at ready-made images of digitally altered human beings. They do not reflect the artist’s mirrored characteristics (as was a previous generation’s tendency), much less the intended goal of drawing the unique living model in front of their eyes. Visual images form us precisely because they help shape our understanding of “who we are.”

French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser argues that representations form us, creating us through interpellation:

> Ideological systems call out to or ‘hail’ social subjects and tell them their place in the system. In popular culture, interpellation refers to the ways that cultural products address their consumers and recruit them into a particular ideological position. Images can be said to designate the kind of viewer they intend us to be, and in speaking to us as that kind of viewer to shape us as particular ideological subjects. (Sturken and Cartwright 385)

We are shaped unconsciously by these representations then; later, with a shock of recognition, we see ourselves within them. In a way, we become what we contemplate. Images get under our skin in a way that discursive text does not, constructing identity. The problem with many of these admittedly beautiful, culturally constructed images is that people believe them and try to recreate themselves in these images. Cindy Jackson, for example, has taken this to an extreme, having had fifty-two operations to transform herself into a living likeness of that cultural icon of beauty, the Barbie doll.

Hilary Putnam, Nelson Goodman and Richard Rorty consider language a primary means of contributing to “world-making” rather than simply reflecting the “ready-made

---

45 Cindy Jackson is the 2012 Guinness Book of World Records holder for having had, since 1988, 52 cosmetic surgeries intended to recreate her body into a living icon of beauty.


world." This capacity for identity formation and world-making seems to be even more obvious when applied to visual forms of representation. For the viewer and the maker, images are means of coming to understand, not simply of stating understandings we have come to independently. Visuals form us.

Visually the epistemological capacity to form us and are often co-opted by the consumerist global market economy, but visuals can also be used to critique ideologies and subvert media manipulation as publications like Vancouver based Adbusters have done brilliantly for over twenty years. Brian Jungen\textsuperscript{49}, Mona Hatoum\textsuperscript{50}, Tim Hawkinson\textsuperscript{51}, Shirin Nishat\textsuperscript{52} and Rebecca Belmore\textsuperscript{53} immediately spring to mind as only a few of a host of contemporary artists whose visual work brilliantly critiques a variety of ideological positions. Visual images can construct and deconstruct, create and complicate understanding, all the while attempting to make sense of life. Although visual images can themselves be subverted, images can be a powerful subversive voice in calling a society to come to its senses, or in making sense of one’s own life.

Models of knowledge have powerful consequences. For example, given human beings’ mimetic nature, a link seems possible between media bombardment idealizing a very slender body type and the otherwise inexplicable levels of anorexia and bulimia in western populations. In the midst of affluence, how do we explain children dying of self-starvation? When the time comes to act, Iris Murdoch insightfully points out, morality is chiefly a matter of practice; it is a valid question to ask just what are we and our children habitually practicing or looking at? Foucault has forever linked knowledge and power

\textsuperscript{49} Vancouver based Brian Jungen was the winner of the inaugural Sobey Art Award in 2002 and the 2010 Gershon Iskowitz Prize. Jungen disassembles and reassembles objects maintaining the integrity of the source materials while creating new possibilities for meaning. http://www.gallery.ca/en/see/collections/artwork.php?mkey=97228

\textsuperscript{50} Internationally exhibited Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum, is 2011 winner of the prestigious Joan Miro Prize, has participated in the Turner Prize, Venice Biennale, and Documenta XI. http://whitecube.com/artists/mona_hatoum

\textsuperscript{51} Represented by the Pace Gallery in New York, and Los Angeles resident Tim Hawkinson’s exhibition record includes the Venice Biennale (1999); Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art (2000); the Power Plant, Toronto (2000); the Whitney Biennial (2002); and the 2003 Corcoran Biennial, Washington, DC. http://www.pbs.org/art21/artists/tim-hawkinson

\textsuperscript{52} Shirin Nishat, internationally recognised Iranian artist winner of the International Award at the XLVII Venice Biennale and named in December 2010 Artist of the Decade by Huffington Post critic G. R. Denson, for the intersection of her work with global culture. http://www.gladstonegallery.com/neshat.asp

\textsuperscript{53} Vancouver based, Rebecca Belmore was Canada’s representative at the 2005 Venice Biennale, and is internationally recognised for her multi-disciplinary performance and installation art that addresses history, place and identity.
through the image of the panopticon’s normalizing gaze of surveillance, illustrating how knowledge and power are negotiated in our society. A Hopi legend suggests that the one who tells the best story has the most power. Perhaps our current society, regulated as it is by knowledge, and saturated by consumer driven media entertainment, is not so different than Plato’s society. Perhaps it has always been that the one who tells the best story of knowledge truly has the most power. But rather than banishment and censorship as a response to the epistemological power of the visual, understanding more fully imagery’s active capacities and recognising in them a vital component of rationality seems a more reasoned approach. Education, not censorship. Aristotle suggests just this in his epistemological model that welcomes the visual as part of theoretical, practical and productive ways of knowing and sees visual art as a means by which truth is attained, not led astray.

Within the context of contemporary culture, intellectual realizations, what Fels (1999) call moments of recognition, are vitally necessary for the artist to attend to. Theory can be viewed as a lens that makes sense of a societal or intellectual situation and informs visual work. Art is created and interpreted in a complex interlayered four-dimensional interaction between artwork, maker, receiver and context out of which multiple meanings can be realized and welcomed. Neilsen discusses this in fiction writing:

What we know in this discipline is that knowledge, like fiction, is contextual, read differently by different people. Knowledge reads, tastes, sounds, dances, informs, speaks in one way from my ideological perspective, another way from yours. Knowledge and knowing are saturated with political purpose, intent, cultural and social values, and vested interests. And knowledge, as we have continued to create it in our discipline, has no greater claim to authenticity, to fidelity, to truth, to validity, or reliability than do the fictions we read, write, or tell ourselves daily in print or in conversations to get on with our lives. We tell ourselves stories in order to live, says Joan Didion. Well, we tell ourselves "truths" and "facts" for that reason as well. (Neilsen 208)

In Wittgenstein’s late work, the *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), language is seen as being responsive to context. Meanings are not fixed but shift depending on the situated context. Wittgenstein used the term “language games” to suggest that like the rules of a board game, the language rules inherent within each context are not fixed but shift, and that we absorb these rules intuitively. For Wittgenstein, Peirce (1839-1914) and

---

54 Heard in a CBC interview 2009.
Saussure (1857-1913), context is crucial to meaning, and like a game of chess, the codes and conventions, the rules of each particular language game, determine specific meanings, and require interpretation. “Here the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life” (Zwicky 19R). In my view, language games can then be understood, to continue the metaphor of the island and the ocean, as the splintering of the one island of language into an archipelago of islands all surrounded by the unspeakable ocean. In this late work, even as he bursts the boundaries of his earlier understanding of language, exploding words into an archipelago, each island representing a different language game, the mystery beyond discursive text remains untouched.

Like language, the making of and interpreting of art is inescapably influenced by the lived situation and context. Words, of course, are not the only “language game” in town. Materials too can function as signs—made up of a literal signifier and the myriad complex layers of understandings, connoted and denoted, intended and unintended that are signified. There are no innocent materials, no less than eyes. The direct use of signifiers in art, and here I am thinking of Brian Jungen’s culturally coded double appropriation of Nike running shoes, Tim Hawkinson’s football field sized installations and Ann Hamilton’s uncanny and prelinguistically perceived performance/installations, unleash meaning from material objects themselves as they exist in particular contexts. To understand Hamilton’s 2007 installation indigo blue on permanent display in the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, one needs to recognise the meaning materials themselves proclaim and also understand the history behind the use of indigo to dye jeans and the economic reality of that particular place. Brian Jungen’s meanings are dependent on viewers understanding the history of appropriation of first nation’s ceremonial objects and the cultural history of Nike running shoes.

Suppose someone said: every familiar word, in a book for example, actually carries an atmosphere with it in our minds, a corona of lightly indicated uses. (Wittgenstein Philosophical 246)

Wittgenstein’s corona can be usefully applied to the multiplicity of lightly indicated uses encoded into materials as they interact with a context. Art expresses through material, but since materials bring along their own intelligence and spark contextual meanings, expression is a dialogue rather than a monologue. Viewers bring their own particular
historical situatedness with them, complicating and enriching this dialogue making it more like a three-dimensional game of chess. In this process of signification, mundane objects are transformed into metaphors. Jan Zwicky sees metaphor as essential to how understanding is realized. In the foreword to Wisdom and Metaphor she writes:

This is because the shape of metaphorical thought is also the shape of wisdom; what a human mind must do in order to comprehend a metaphor is a version of what it must do in order to be wise. But of course we are not wise in a vacuum; we are wise about things, situations, people, the world. Thus, [she] argues, those who think metaphorically are enabled to think truly because the shape of their thinking echoes the shape of the world.

(Zwicky 118)

And in response I understand that art is a form of understanding that, through its embeddedness in material contexts, understands through this embodied state, and in so doing the artist’s process echoes the shape of the world and simultaneously shapes the world.

Contemporary art-making practices are theory based, concept driven and thematically generated, requiring context to be taken into consideration. The work interacts intentionally with the intellectual realizations that collectively are part of the sense-making conversations that critical and cultural theory engages in. Artists must be aware of the critical conversations occurring around them, the making of art no less than the speaking of language occurring within a context that determines what meaning(s) will be taken from that work. One’s socio-cultural context and essential cultural historicity are a critical part of self-awareness and are formative for one’s art. In art, as in other pursuits, meanings are not fixed and autonomous but change in response to culture and context. Wittgenstein would refer to the different contexts as each having different assumptions, rules, and meanings, something that artists frequently work with. The meaning of Duchamp’s urinal changes dramatically when the factory-produced object was taken into a gallery and signed. Given the global flow of culture, meanings can shift unexpectedly despite the makers’ intentions. Marita and Sturken describe a dramatic example of viewers making meanings not intended by producers, cited by the Encyclopaedia Britannica entry on “cultural globalization.” The spontaneous response to the movie “The Titanic” in China became a publicly acceptable means of expressing the grief of “a generation of aging Chinese revolutionaries who had devoted their lives to building a
form of socialism that had long since disappeared" (Sturken and Cartwright 55). We are each embedded in an historical context and are historically situated. This can change the meanings we make as we interpret works of art.

Embedded in an historical context we are inescapably situated, paradoxically shaping and being shaped by form, forming and being formed by culture. It is in the collision between self and world, inner and outer that art arises. Davis, et.al as quoted by Lynn Fels writes: “Far from merely existing relatively autonomously in the same location, individuals and environments continually specify one another. Just as I am shaped by my location, so is my location is shaped by my presence” (Fels in the wind 43). Art occurs out of “a web of culturally mediated affective encounters with the world” (Chaplin) that in turn shapes the world.
Self-Emptying

It is clear that ethics cannot be put into words. Ethics is transcendental. (Ethics and aesthetics are one and the same.) 

(Wittgenstein *Tractatus* 86)

Figure 7. *Heaven and earth are full* (*Tenebrae* preliminary drawing), 24” x 30”, graphite on map
The practice of attention invites self-emptying. In this chapter I propose that the various types of self-emptying practiced by artists: decreation, loneliness, self-scrutiny, catharsis, awareness and unknowing, all generate energy to fuel making through dislodging the self. Practicing mindful, intentional, self-emptying attention becomes the link that explains Wittgenstein’s elusive phrase connecting aesthetics with ethics.

The process of releasing the self’s grip is difficult, impossible perhaps, and due to perception’s inextricable link with culture and language, doomed to fail from the start. But in most cultures and all religions ancient technologies have been cultivated whose aim is just this. These ancient practices can be described as technologies of a sort, but technologies of the soul or of the self, as Foucault called them, so for the artist, drawing can be understood similarly as a technology or practice that bears upon the self. Drawing and contemplative practices hone the practitioner’s ability to pay attention; model how to extend one’s perceptual abilities; give an experience of how to be comfortable with one’s inner territory; teach how to listen into this clearing and, in time, how to be comfortable with silence. Attentiveness takes us elsewhere; self streams away, even if only for a time. Tim Lilburn names “self-emptying listening” (Lilburn in Grimm and Lilburn 6) as his compositional method, allowing that the self never leaves but “it can learn to sit quietly” (10). He distances himself from romanticism whose downfall is the narcissistic preoccupation with self that it so easily slides into without the essential self-emptying gesture. Replacing striving, “We let the ear grow large, and what

55 The self or ego. Ego is defined in the Canadian edition of Webster’s Dictionary as “A term associated primarily with the German Philosopher Fichte, for the ‘I’, the subject which is conscious of itself, thinks, has experiences of and determines the outside world (the ‘object’ or ‘nonego’) || the individual self, looked on as an organized being distinct from others || (pop) one’s image of oneself, to bolster up one’s ego || (psychoanal.) the conscious personality as opposed to the unconscious (300).

56 I am referring to mindful, meditative, contemplative, mystical and apophatic practices and traditions within all world religions that practice silence, listening, detachment and unitary consciousness. Hindu, Buddhist, Christian, Judaic and Islamic religions all have various traditions of meditative practices.

57 See Meyer’s “Teaching Practices of Living Inquiry” for her Heideggerian influenced use of the word clearing.

58 Lilburn Distances himself from Heideggerian clearing as well as Romanticism. Lilburn explains: “What I’ve been talking about—Cassianic contemplation, listening in the poem – is not Wordsworthian seeing, nor is it the Heideggerian clearing into which what is wild steps. It’s true that Romanticism, in both its Wordsworthian and Heideggerian forms, dreams of a nearness of human consciousness to the world, but it seems to me that Romanticism is too full of compliments for that consciousness; it is transfixed by the spectacle of the attention of the artist, moved by the apparent heroism of the artistic gaze. Romanticism says too much about itself; it is narcissistic”(10). However, I see a distinction between how Lilburn understands Heidegger’s term and how Karen Meyer uses the term “clearing.” The distinction would be that the self-emptying Lilburn refers to is specifically a decentering of the self, whereas it is possible for the Heideggerian clearing to happen in multiple ways, some of which Lilburn differentiates self-emptying from.
is in the world comes near; we’re less apart, then, less rogue, dangerous; the old union wobbles back” (10). Being as “close to being empty” (10) as possible, Lilburn believes, is the goal for both artist and contemplative, describing “an effort is made to hold the emptiness of this intense listening” (3). Lilburn suggests:

Let the poem walk towards you. I want to emphasize how helpless the poet is in this situation: he prepares a place, an emptiness, an unwrittenness, where the poem may come. Writing, then, is mostly standing in a place and waiting, holding the pose of being undetermined, alert, greedy (8). We hear best, though as contemplatives and as poets, when we are as close as we can get to being empty, leaning towards what we can’t fully make out, but from which we can never turn. (10)

Self-emptying attention in art-making practices holds the emptiness of intense listening, focussed awareness, and in this active receptivity, moments of un-self consciousness are experienced: self can learn to sit quietly as Lilburn says.

Decreation

Art and ethics are linked through the practice of self-emptying attention. Quite unlike the aggrandizement of self that, famously, artists like Picasso and Miles Davis indulged in throughout their personal lives, the practice of art is best cultivated under conditions of detachment, directing attention away from self. Primarily an effort directed towards emptying one’s mind, Simone Weil believed attention was, for its own sake, supremely important. Similar to contemplative practices of waiting and detachment cultivated in eastern and western practices alike, “this way of looking is first of all attentive. The soul empties itself of all its own contents in order to receive into itself the being it is looking at, just as he is, in all his truth” (Weil SW Reader 51). Weil continues:

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object; it means holding in our minds, within reach of this thought, but on a lower level and not in contact with it, the diverse knowledge we have acquired which we are forced to make use of. . . . Above all our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive. . . . All wrong translations, all absurdities in geometry problems, all clumsiness of style, and all faulty connection of ideas in compositions and essays, all such things are due to the fact that

---

59 It is possible that both Davis and Picasso were able to do in their art-work what they chose not to do in their personal lives.
thought has seized upon some idea too hastily, and being thus prematurely blocked, is not open to the truth. (49)

Attentiveness entails waiting, intensely with heightened expectation and diminished self-consciousness and preoccupation. It is carving out an absence in one’s self-experience so that one can be filled with the presence that one is attentive to. To hone and extend one’s capacity for attentiveness was, for Weil, a profoundly worthwhile and selfless act. She believed that in order to be attentive, one needed to let go of the self in a profound abnegation, a de-selfing or desiring after the experience of nothingness so that the object of one’s attention could be seen with clarity. Attention is a concentration of all the effort one is capable of. Slow, intense, contemplative, humble attention, unflinching especially in the face of one’s faults, is what Weil suggests cultivating. Attention requires, she asserts, a decreation, a willingness to become nothing, in order to extend one’s perception outward (Weil SW Reader 350-356).

Simone Weil uses the term decreation to describe a double movement that she believed was an integral part of the act of creation that actually releases energy to fuel the making. “We participate in the creation of the world by decreating ourselves” (351). By this Weil understands that it is necessary to renounce and purify the self, to strip away the self, killing it to liberate the energy to create. Like a seed, one must die to oneself “in order to liberate a tied up energy, in order to possess an energy which is free and capable of understanding the true relationship of things” (353). Extraordinarily difficult as it is to excise one’s self, and never possible to entirely attain, this is what is necessary to liberate the energy tied up in the self and use it to create something where nothing was before. “Except the seed die... It has to die in order to liberate the energy it bears within it, so that with this energy new forms may be developed” (352).

Iris Murdoch is indebted to Weil’s articulation of attentiveness and decreation, describing un-selfing as the first step towards making moral choices. She sees the sustained, disciplined and deep seeing cultivated in art as a means of dislodging the “anxious and avaricious tentacles of the self” (Murdoch 103). She contrasts solipsism—the self-preoccupation of living in a self-aggrandizing fantasy world, with the outward direction of attention “away from self” (59). Focusing one’s attention outward is an occasion for “un-selfing”:
This is not easy and requires, in art or morals, a discipline. One might say here that art is an excellent analogy of morals, or indeed that it is in this respect a case of morals. We cease to be in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need. (59)

Not only can art provide an analogy but it also provides a means of inquiry, an experience of dislodging the self from the driver’s seat. And once someone has experienced self-emptying decreation in the context of drawing, then hope exists that s/he can apply it in other situations until it becomes habitual. Murdoch says “that our ability to act well ‘when the time comes’ depends partly, perhaps largely, upon the quality of our habitual objects of attention” (Murdoch 56). Murdoch concedes that art can participate in the consolation of fantasy, but it can also “silence and expel self…[T]o contemplate and delineate nature with a clear eye…is the checking of selfishness in the interest of seeing the real” (64, 65) Murdoch quotes Weil’s discussion of decreation, saying that great art teaches us “how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self (Weil 442). Murdoch continues:

This exercise of detachment is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a colour or a sound. Unsentimental contemplation of nature exhibits the same quality of detachment: selfish concerns vanish, nothing exists except the things that are seen. (Murdoch 65)

Like Weil, Murdoch believed that the ability to perceive what is true is connected with the suppression of self and is an essential ethical practice. Furthermore, Weil identified that the essential suppression of self generates energy to move forward.

Loneliness

Recovery

After the heart attack
I spent days following light
patches through the house.

Front room–slanting arrival. Up
stairs, angled shaft traces a trajectory.
Illumines front (following floors, up walls,
over ceilings) to back, this hollow shell.
Its slow gentle slanting pace
fills, makes ready.

No sooner am I settled, soaking in its
wordless warmth, then it is gone.
Continuing its inexorable scrutiny, filling
shifted-foundation plaster cracks
with golden light.

Towards day’s end, cloistered upstairs room
is lit. Raking rays gild
careless detritus of the day.

Outside now, craning neck follows
tree filtered last light. (Grimm, 2009)

Both inner and outer movements of attentiveness are necessary, equally scrutinizing oneself and the world. Playwright, novelist, essayist, painter and China’s only Nobel Laureate in Literature, Gao Xingjian, calls it loneliness, identifying, like Weil, a double movement that he says is a form of aesthetics that also has ethical connotations. “[W]hile observing one’s external environment, one is at the same time examining the self that is located within it, and to a certain extent this is an affirmation of one’s own personal worth” (Xingjian 164). Carefully, slowly, we examine the world, and ourselves, acknowledging our inextricable situatedness within our cultural, societal, and historic context. We can never be fully objective, uninfluenced by identity, cultural constructs, beliefs and worldviews, but we can be mindful, curious, and conscious of these forming forces. Scrutiny of self and scrutiny of the world balance one another. Aesthetics necessitates an intimate projection and finding of self within the work, even as self-scrutiny is practiced. The aim of this scrutiny is to reveal what is “rarely known … of the truth of the human world” (42) … and “has ethical connotations as well” (43). However, “It is not the writer’s duty to preach morality … For the writer, truth in literature approximates ethics, and is the ultimate ethics of literature” (43). Xingjian, along with Weil and Murdoch, links aesthetics and ethics through his insistence on self-examination and in so doing, reaffirms Wittgenstein’s famous phrase.

Internationally renowned artist and 1994 Turner Prize recipient Anthony Gormley describes his sculptural practice as an “intimate architecture that invites an empathetic inhabitation of the imagination of the viewer.” (Gormley in conversation with Gombrich in Hutchinson 17) The double movement of aesthetics that Xingjian identifies might be
viewed as a healthy sort of projection that yields artistic insight rather than relational 
chaos for both viewer and artist.

Xingjian unpacks the double movement of aesthetics by pointing out the necessity for 
examination. To avoid the “tangled mass” (Xingjian 164) of devolving into solipsism, that 
stinking mess of self-regard and egoism, Xingjian believes self-scrutiny and detached 
distance are vital.

One must examine both what is internal and what is external—in other 
words, use another eye to calmly observe the outside world as well as 
one’s own inner world. This third eye, which can transcend the limitations 
of one’s self, is what is known as consciousness, or even wisdom. (164)

One needs to linger in loneliness to examine both self and the world. Without the 
scrutiny of loneliness, identity is incomplete, too easily influenced, and overly susceptible 
to mutability, leaving one to parrot, consume and regurgitate, not create. Without 
scrutiny subjectivity can fall into either of two common traps–ego driven domination or 
inauthentic reflection of textual/cultural influence. To a large extent we are shaped and 
formed by our cultural context, but this shaping is not all that we are nor all that human 
beings are capable of reflecting. The effort to employ critical tools such as the Stop and 
loneliness are worth the effort. Xingjian identifies loneliness as a vital critical tool, one 
that is essential to growing up and is prerequisite for any modicum of creative freedom. 
Creating anything requires the ability to reflect, and “reflection can only be done when 
one is alone” (Xingjian165). Xingjian explains that enmeshment with readymade forms, 
ideologies, fashions, and propaganda encourages one to pour oneself into a familiar 
mould rather than realizing one’s own shape and form. Finding one’s authentic identity is 
a matter of being comfortable with loneliness and cannot be created while looking 
outside of oneself for affirmation. Authenticity is being honest. Authenticity is realized 
through one’s own voice, not by parroting anothers. For Xingjian literature (and by 
extension visual art) is simply focusing one’s attentiveness on one’s self until a 
“consciousness that sheds light on this self begins to emerge … giving concrete form to 
perceptions” (Xingjian 44). Most importantly for Xingjian, and in response to questioning 
the possibility of authentic subjectivity, art is a form of expression that is best made from 
the margins; art is a small honest gesture, a humble inconspicuous stance taken by an 
individual.
Self-examination and loneliness are integral parts of the work of the artist, necessary to avoid “a tangled mass in the heart” (164) and prevent parroting already existing forms. The task of interpreting signs, sorting between sign, signifier and signified, whether by maker or viewer of art, requires a particular state of receptivity and examination, without which signs can be misread. Applebaum also observes that the ego is problematic since it can cloud interpretation, blinding insight. Without the stop, “The sign falls on eyes blinded by ambition” (75). The problem with the unexamined self is those opportunities that require an uncluttered space to recognize are crowded out and remain unseen. Martin also agrees that pride and ego cloud vision and that the work generated through pride is flawed:

In your work, in everyone’s work, in the work of the world, the work that reminds of pride is gradually abandoned. Having in moments of perfection-enjoyed freedom from pride we know that that is what we want. With this knowing we recognise and eliminate expressions of pride.

(Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 67)

Through loneliness, a double form of aesthetics, self and the world are examined and held. Art-making practices, drawing in particular, are an apprenticeship in being alone and being comfortable with it—finding not only comfort when previously there was terror, but ecstasy, self-forgetfulness, the antidote to solipsism, self transcendence and an ethical start. Occasionally one discovers that one has made more than one knows. By stopping, practicing self-emptying decreation and loneliness, little by little, consciousness clears and sight is clarified. This process of re-enchanting sight releases energy: “not only is a thing unaltered (to fit a private intelligence), it also supplies an energy by which to reveal the context of vision” (Applebaum xi).
Reclaiming embodied sensory perception and practicing self-emptying attention open both artist and viewer to moments of awareness. For Agnes Martin, “Perception, reception and response are all the same. Sometimes we perceive, sometimes we
receive and sometimes we respond but it is all the same. It is all awareness of reality (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 96).

Moments of awareness are never complete, are fragmentary and fleeting, but are never forgotten. Out of awareness come hints of life and inspiration, “at the slightest hint . . . the work is alive” (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 32). Martin recommends to young artists the untroubled mind, practicing detached listening:

- Being detached and impersonal is related to freedom
- That’s the answer for inspiration
- The untroubled mind . . .
- To a detached person the complication of the involved life is like chaos.
- If you don’t like the chaos you’re a classicist;
- If you like it you’re a romanticist.

(Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 38)

Martin is a classicist who cloisters herself away from the world, away from all distractions, to listen for inspiration. Canadian artist Betty Goodwin, by way of contrast and by Martin’s account, is a romantic, listening daily to the news as a means of reconnecting herself with the pain of existence. Both artists pay attention intentionally and systematically, and paint out of this awareness. “There is increased and decreased awareness, that is all.” (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 172) Finally, Martin identifies awareness as necessary to defeat pride and as the most important part of the work artists do:

Our best opportunity to witness the defeat of pride is in our work, in all the time that we are working and in the work itself. Work is self-expression. We must not think of self-expression as something we may do or something we may not do. Self-expression is inevitable. In your work, in the way that you do your work and in the results of your work your self is expressed. Behind and before self-expression is a developing awareness I will also call the “work.” It is a most important part of the work. There is the work in our minds, the work in our hands and the work as a result.

(Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 172)

Martin attends to awareness, whereas the authors of Art and Fear name the charge that is looked for by artists, cautioning against borrowing “a charge from another time and place” instead insisting that the charge be authentic to the artist’s own context (Bayles and Orland 53). Each artist’s work is, rightly and inextricably, linked to his or her own context and time period, not any other. Quoting and appropriating are common self-
conscious strategies and are not the same as stealing a charge inauthentically from another time period. Looking for the charge and being led forward by the charge, Gormley names moments of awareness as being generated from the interstices between his own expressiveness with the expressiveness of the viewer.

It’s a meeting of the expressiveness of me—the artist and the expressiveness of you, the viewer. And for me the charge comes from that confrontation … It is also an invitation for the viewer to sense his own body through this moment of stillness. (Gormley in conversation with Gombrich as quoted by Hutchinson 12)

Gormley’s awareness is deeply formed by Vipassana training and both Eastern and Western spiritual traditions (32). Artists use words like quickenings, awareness, potency, presence, and charge to communicate similar awarenesses that are intensely felt, generally not fully understood, and poorly explained with words that draw them into their work.

Art-making practices like drawing (and like Gormley’s sculptural practice) require such intense focussed attention that practitioners regularly experience self-forgetfulness. As the practice deepens awareness of self recedes, one become unselfconscious, linear awareness of time melts away and drawings reach a new level of clarity and insightfulness. When one is unselfconscious, the self, with its multiple complexities, falls away. When attentiveness is practiced, awareness of self loosens its grip and what becomes possible is a clarified vision of what is real. This is not a metaphor but a literal description of the progressive honing of sight. One draws not because one can see but in order to see. Deep seeing of this nature can heal the subject-object duality according to philosopher and educational theorist Heesoon Bai, who looks to the Japanese Tea Ceremony as her case study exploring how “Zen ethics and aesthetics converge . . . overcoming dualistic ego-consciousness and discovering the continuity of the self with the non-self, thereby achieving harmony with the world” (Bai 36-51). In other words, what happens when the artist practices self-emptying attentiveness is that the sharp division between self and object of the gaze is found to be illusory. Radically dissolving boundaries between subject and object, achieving subject-object unity or fusion, is the

---

60 A state of fusion experienced between subject and object is noted in both science and art. Eisner cites Einstein and Nobel Laureate Barbara McClintock, describing the ‘knowing’ that is common between artist, mystic, lover and scientist as marked by loss of self through “subjective fusion with the object of knowledge” and feelings more commonly associated with religious worshiper or lover. (Eisner, The arts and the creation of mind 199)
key to Buddhist and Zen dismantling of ego consciousness and provides the link between art and morality. Bai sees in art-making potential to cultivate an empathetic moral imagination; with Schusterman she looks to the aestheticization of ethics, and with Wittgenstein, affirms that ethics and aesthetics are one. Wittgenstein himself connected deep seeing, art and ethics when he wrote in his diary: “The work of art is the object seen sub species aeternitatis and the good life is the world seen sub specie aeternitatis. This is the connection between art and ethics” (Wittgenstein as quoted by Kanterian 70).

Despite moments of clearing, where nondual unselfconsciousness, and self-emptying occur, self streams away but one’s subjectivity paradoxicaly remains intact. Art-making requires that there be an artist; a living, breathing, perceiving, thinking and feeling human subject needs to show up, without which, the product cannot be named as art. For photographer scholar Stuart Richmond, in “life, relationships, ethics, art, aesthetics, a creative feeling subject is necessary. There has to be a life behind a work of art or it could not be recognised as such. Having a voice is like discovering one’s own self” (Richmond in Richmond and Snowber 161). Subjectivity is what defines us, he explains, it is the indexical I, the irreducible me-ness, the unique qualities of personhood, thought and feeling combined, a voice quality, a unique singular quality of identity. Like Emile Zola’s famous phrase: “Art is little corner of the world seen through a temperament” (Bloom 53), subjectivity is what makes an artist’s interpretation possible. E.H. Gombrich writes in Art and Illusion, that the artist “interpreted the world in terms of the schemata he made and knew” (246). An artist sees what she can paint, learns ways of representing, and therefore then sees in that way, inviting others to see that way too. “As Oscar Wilde said, there was no fog in London before Whistler painted it” (Gombrich 275). Subjectivity, interpretation and voice are inseparable.

Nonetheless, subjectivity is deeply distrusted in contemporary art criticism and philosophy, being characterized as the dominating self-consciousness of the single self-preoccupied ego, as will-to-power, and the root of modernity’s many crises and disasters (Bowie 345). But subjectivity need not be ego-driven. Subjectivity, like

---

61 Stuart Richmond points out in his discussion on “Subjectivity” in Landscapes of Aesthetic Education that opposing subjectivity and objectivity is common but can be misleading and can miss the point. Objectivity is not obtainable, not even in science, it turns out, and is not remotely the goal in art-making practices.

62 In conversation.

63 Bowie’s own position is that the complex history of subjectivity is not so easily characterized.
attention, can be honed. And whether one hones subjectivity—practising scrutiny and self-emptying makes a difference. Since Saussure and the subsequent linguistic turn in philosophy, subjectivity is frequently seen as an illusion, as the product of discourses or texts. Authentic self-expression, the inner life, aesthetic originality, and subjective expression are therefore discredited, characterized in texts such as *Documents of Art*\(^6^4\) as delusional (Beech 137). From modernist over-inflated views of the expressive ego to the deconstructive deflated ego of the postmodernist, subjectivity has swung in wild pendulum-like reactions. But perhaps neither of these critiques of subjectivity allows that scrutiny, decration, self-emptying or loneliness is necessary or possible. For Gao Xingjian, art-making requires the subjective historically situated self. Subjectivity is critical; but the artist’s is a voice of an ordinary, perhaps more sensitive than normal, frail individual who feels, not a dominating ego driven voice. It is a weak but authentic “small inconspicuous stance taken by an individual” (Xingjian 35). Subjectivity in art for Xingjian is about honesty and does not include righteous representation of ideals, being a spokesperson, prophet or producing propaganda any more than it represents will-to-power or dominating egoism. Frail human beings sometimes know and sometimes do not know, and both states of mind can be artistically productive. Subjectivity in art-making is humbly examining and trusting one’s embodied experience, and recognising one’s own voice. Self-emptying practices are vital.

Art unapologetically arises from an individual’s subjective responses that make sense or nonsense of a culture or a life. This sense-making occurs more often when the artist practices self-emptying attention, invites the self to sit quietly, and waits for a clearing. Artists give concrete form to their subjective (perceiving, emoting, thinking) selves, absorb theories, views, intuitions—clear and inchoate, from their context, and condense vast quantities of information into something intelligible. Among philosophers like Foucault, Kristeva\(^6^5\), Cixous\(^6^6\) and Lingis, who are interested in new forms of subjectivity that do not participate in a domination or will-to-power associated with the modernist

---

\(^6^4\) “There was a widespread assumption that claims to subjective expression and aesthetic originality on the part of the artist were a myth, a delusional hangover from the Cartesian fantasy of the ‘inner self’ as an authentic expressive self.” Is a characteristic view written by John Roberts in his essay “Replicants and Cartesians in 2007.

\(^6^5\) Kristeva writes about the subject-in-process rather than the autonomous subject.

\(^6^6\) Cixious’s writing theorizes the embodied self.
critique, is artist Antony Gormley who reformulates subjectivity as the collective subjective:

I am interested in something that one could call the collective subjective…Somehow truth has to be removed from a depicted absolute to a subjective experience, where value transfers from an external system that might be illustrated to one in which individual experience is held and given intensity. (Hutchinson 28)

We are, each of us, individual, unique, “alive in our own skins” and fragile. We are invited by Xingjian to hold and give intensity to that loneliness, but we are not alone and with attention, the boundaries between individuals can erode a little, be seen to be what connects. Art happens in the interstices between interior and exterior and requires intelligence, draws on theory, history, ideas; a real, creative, feeling, embodied subject is a non-negotiable. That subjectivity remains makes it possible to know one’s own voice, creating rather than consuming culture. It is in the process of self-emptying that subjectivity becomes productive. Through the process of cultivating habits of attention that give an experience of unselfconsciousness self-emptying, and through decreation, loneliness and scrutiny unseat the ego, dualisms dissolve and energy is released to fuel the process of art-making itself.
Catharsis

Figure 9.  *Break and Mend*, 30” x 45 “, graphite, steel and 22 K gold leaf

In this chapter’s previous sections I presented self-emptying attention and detachment as generative of clarity to “perceive what is true,” an ethical movement as Murdoch suggests; decreation as generative of energy to fuel the making; nondual relationships made possible through deep seeing as Heesoon Bai describes; and the opening of awareness, dislodging the self through loneliness. In this section I explore that from self-emptying attention flows healing for the artist herself. Like self-emptying, decreation and loneliness, catharsis generates energy and forward momentum that fuel epistemological insight.

Catharsis comes from the Greek word *katharsis* meaning, “cleanse” or “purge,” and from *katharsos*, meaning, “purify,” or “clean.”

Although the term has medical origins, Aristotle used it in the *Poetics*, defending art (theatre and tragedy in particular) from


76
Plato’s accusation that by drawing on the emotions, art was dangerous, inciting hysteria and leading away from rationality. Aristotle’s view was that art does not incite (as Plato feared), but expiates and releases emotions, cleansing, purging and calming (Aristotle 105). Thus Aristotle created an indispensable place for art and emotions in his epistemology, seeing them as part of full rationality.

Catharsis does not just expiate emotion, as Aristotle describes, but is a means of coming to new insight, coming to recognitions that generate new levels of understanding, new meanings that indicate an epistemological practice. Insight happens not prior to beginning the work, but while one works and often long after the work is over, and in my experience, catharsis is usually accompanied by a bodily burst of new energy. In catharsis is found one of the primary values and sources of power in art-making practices and what makes art, for Wittgenstein, capable of making manifest where words are insufficient. However, in the Poetics Aristotle primarily considers the effects of catharsis on the actor and viewer but not on the artist/author. From the vantage point of a maker, in catharsis I experience a fusing of emotion and intellection resulting in a bodily release of new understanding, relief, healing and a forward momentum of energy. Understanding came for me years after many paintings were made, after I was stopped, and woke up. Looking back at this body of work now, the images frighten me in their prescience. What I had no clue about was staring me in the face… Now I feel like I am waking up. Catharsis can create a clearing that makes sense not only of a composition but also of a life. Consider Annie Dillard speaking of her writing process:

The line of words fingers your own heart. It invades arteries, and enters the heart on a flood of breath; it palpates the dark muscle strong as horses, feeling for something, it knows not what. A queer picture beds in the muscles like a worm encysted–some film of feeling…these fragments are heavy with meaning. The line of words peels them back, dissects them out. Will the bared tissue burn? Do you want to expose these scenes to the light? You may locate them and leave them, or poke the spot hard till the sore bleeds on your finger, and write with that blood. If the sore spot is not fatal, if it does not grow and block something, you can use its power for many years. (Dillard Writing 21)

This is catharsis in action. It applies equally to visual processes of making. Importantly, the artist follows the lead of embodied data into the unknown; unresolved pain, tension, inchoate unsettled fragments are held with curiosity and compassion, followed in a quest for insight. When artists express, and they do, that somehow they feel less alive when
they are not working, or that in some way they need to make art in order to feel complete and whole, or more dramatically, that art-making has saved their life in some way, it is catharsis that is at play in the maker. Catharsis powerfully releases emotions, lances them at times, but most importantly, catharsis is key to coming to understanding.

“Whenever there is pain, it is time to start telling stories” (Irani 237). Master storyteller Anosh Irani identifies pain as the source of all storytelling (even in comedy, he argues) in an interview with Shelagh Rogers, explaining that pain is explored in the work until clarity is found, releasing grace to let go. This, Irani says, is the role of the storyteller. “All he had was pain, and it was forcing him to tell a story” (237) a character in Irani’s Danahu Road realizes before remembering a traumatic event that provides the key to understanding a generational transfer of unresolved grief and guilt. For an elderly character in the same novel, the need to tell a difficult story is signalled by the rubbing of knees. “Memories were stored in every part of his body, and when they irrupted they had to be soothed” (34). Pain is both stored and released through muscle memory. Dewey wrote of expression as “clarification of turbid emotion”; realizations arise when “they are reflected in the mirror of art, and as they know themselves they are transfigured” (Dewey 80). Emotions generate energy that cannot be dispensed with just by wishing it to be so, as any good counsellor will confirm. Emotions can be internalized, stored in muscular memory, doing damage as they fester; they can be discharged; or, the energy can be used, as Dewey suggests, ordered and expressed by objectifying the emotion. This ordering, objectifying through creating forms of representation is what Dewey understands as expression and Aristotle understands as catharsis. More than expelling and purging emotions, though, by engaging in, with and through various forms of representation, understanding is attained. Dewey comes close to this position by saying that the “indirect road of expression” transforms emotions. Catharsis imparts understanding through an experiential and interoceptive depth; the sole avenue of intellectual rationality seems superficial by way of contrast, misleading through an incomplete data set.

Susan Langer, who in the 1950’s authored a theory of art in Philosophy in a New Key and Feeling and Form that profoundly connects feelings with forms of art, is surprisingly dismissive regarding catharsis and expression due to their subjectivity, stating her own position that art creates forms of significance symbolic of human feeling that one knows.
The core import of art is not that it refers or references, but that it negotiates insight (Langer 22). I am puzzled at how Langer’s position does not also require subjectivity; I wholeheartedly agree that art negotiates insight, but do not see that this position discredits catharsis; rather, I would suggest that the understanding and insight that arises through engaging in forms of representation is a continuation and fulfilment of the process of catharsis itself, that results in understanding.

Through forms of representation artists and viewers alike, attempt to make sense of life. The educational theory of transmediation forges a link that provides a rationale for how catharsis negotiates insight. The theory of transmediation suggests that the means by which art-making results in understanding is connected with shifting information between forms of representation. Transmediation is identified by Marjorie Siegel as a process of translating meanings from one sign system (or form of representation) into another that results in a cascade of new meanings and connections (Siegel 455-75). The transformation from one sign system into another depends on forging an imaginative link since no a priori connection exists independently, reminding one of Kant’s free play of the imagination connecting the affect, intuition and sensory knowing with reason, theory and practical reason. Transmediation actively encourages the inclusion of imagination, sensory honing, close noticing, and is critical to inquiry-oriented thinking processes. Suhor identifies the semiotic process of moving across sign systems as a generative process of producing new meanings (Suhor 247-57). This has important pedagogical implications beyond displaying received meanings to the invention of new connections and meanings. Moving across sign systems is perhaps what is at the heart of why art-making and aesthetics can, via Aristotle’s catharsis, be understood as an epistemological process. It is through actively making, forming, inquiring, condensing, using the tools and forms of art-making that we come to understanding, not because we have understood what we are going to make in our heads before we start. Art-making facilitates epistemological understanding; this requires a lifetime of disciplined effort. Art-making is not simply emoting or, as Dillard puts it, “wild blurtling,” but uses skill and intelligence, with real materials, consuming significant chunks of time, following potent

---

68 Transmediation is recently having considerable impact on fields such as medical education (Bleakley et all (2006); Katz, Newell and Hanes; Vladescu et al).

69 Transmediation is closely linked with semiotics. Suhor suggest our symbol-making and manipulating capacity eclipses language use as humanities’ most characteristic trait.
hints that in the final analysis begin with probing a piece of one’s own skin, and ending with healing, new insight, knowledge, understanding, perspective and energy to enact.

Art-making is a generative process of inquiry, but it is specifically through catharsis that art-making, through transmediation, produces understanding, insight and new meanings. Artists tell stories and make images in order to come to understanding themselves; they plumb experiences, follow potent leads, inquire into inchoate unknowns that others have no words for in order to understand—to create images, sounds, theatre, films, poetry, stories that they and others can, with a shock of recognition, name as their own. Through catharsis, art is a form of understanding that generates forward momentum that heals as it completes and enacts rationality. Aesthetics and art-making are, I suggest, indispensible to the philosophical and educational task.

**Unknowing**

Metaphor is part of the not-knowing aspect of art, yet I’m firmly convinced that it is the supreme way of searching for truth. How can this be?

(Charles Simic as quoted by Zwicky in her frontispiece)

The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool. (Dillard *Writing 3*)

I am not suggesting that aesthetics or art-making form an epistemological system, nor is the visual a literal language, but that the visual has an epistemological role as a form of understanding with which we make sense of the world. Arts’ knowing resides in its indeterminacy (the wide multiplicity of that which it sparks), its permeable boundaries and its seamless integration of sense, affect, intuition, intellection and imagination (Eisner *What Can n. pag.*). Flexible purposing, a common practice in art, is a term Dewey coined to describe the intelligence required to shift direction mid process in response to what is happening in the course of the work. Risk taking, pursuing surprising, new and unknown paths and solutions are active art-making practices and are necessary for discoveries in all fields (Eisner *What can n. pag.*). In an article discussing Cassier’s 1943 lecture *The Educational Value of Art*, Thora Ilin Bayer suggests that a misunderstanding is at the heart of the ancient quarrel that severed

---

70 Art cannot be said to be a form of knowing empirically testable through “synthetic propositions whose truth value can be determined” (Eisner 3).
philosophy from the arts in the first place. She suggests that image and philosophy require each other since both are rooted in mimesis. She explains each is necessary for knowledge formation:

Philosophical thought requires the image as the initial means of access to the noetic, and that in the production of philosophy this dialectic of image and idea must constantly be renewed. The key to philosophical education would then … be aesthetic experience that passes beyond itself and confronts itself in the metaphysical experience of the form (Ilin Bayer 51).

Like Aristotle, Ilin Bayer suggests that image and philosophy require and complete each other in coming to the noetic, a word derived from the Greek noesis meaning direct knowing or understanding. In a similar recognition, theorist Paul Ricour believes that understanding is dependent on forming a narrative about an experience.71 “There is no self-understanding that is not mediated by signs, symbols, and texts; in the final analysis self-understanding coincides with the interpretation given to these mediating terms” (Ricœur 15).

Art-making makes sense of life by combining an Aristotelian welcoming of perception and emotion with Kant’s understanding of the imagination, bringing often-chaotic strands into an imaginative meaning-making order. Dewey, Eisner, Wittgenstein, Nussbaum, Ricour, and Gadamer are joined by many scholars (Aoki, Cole, De Cosson, Fels, Gauer, Irwin, Knowles, Meyer, Neilson, Pinar, Richmond, Snowber, Springay, Sullivan, Zwicky) who theorize arts’ practice as a form of knowing and understanding. Creating forms of representation not only reflects the human condition but make sense of it experientially. Most importantly with theorists such as Fels is the insight that forming various kinds of artistic representations is not done after understanding has happened but as an integral part of coming to an understanding. Realization in the midst of making is integral to sparking philosophical forward momentum. The forming of images72 is part of the process of coming to philosophy for Bayer and Siegel, and of coming to understanding for Ricour, Fels, Meyer, Neilson, Richmond, Sullivan and others.

But perhaps what is most distinctive within art-making practices and seen specifically in catharsis is the cultivation of spaces and places for unknowing, whose terrifying generativity is both sought after and feared. Listen to Annie Dillard’s opening paragraph

71 Ricour called the narrative means to knowledge creation “emplotment”.
72 Here the forming of images includes embodied, visual, performative, and textual images.
from *The Writing Life*, “When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner’s pick, a woodcarver’s gouge, a surgeon’s probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow” (Dillard 3). That you follow, it is worth repeating, for its astonishing clarity to sink in. She continues, “Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject?” (3). You have no idea, whether you are using words, paint, clay, cathode tube or discarded receipts, you do not know the outcome and you nonetheless follow where it leads. “You make the path boldly and follow it fearfully. You go where the path leads” (3). And you do not know, nor have any inkling, where you are going. And then she nails it, precisely names the point of the abyss and the point of plunging into it. “The writing has changed, in your hands, and in a twinkling, from an expression of your notions to an epistemological tool” (3). In this transition between knowing and unknowing, between leading and following, is the very moment art-making becomes more than expressing something you know and becomes, rather, an epistemological tool. Art is not just a reflection of knowledge, but a place for unique knowledge formation. Chilean biologist, philosopher and neuroscientist Francisco Varela uses the phrase “laying down a path in walking” when describing the generative implication of launching out, following new ideas into the unknown, in Varela’s case into the political implications of new biology. Varela describes a paradigm shift well beyond a Cartesian split, imagining instead a fleshly “world of no-distance by mutual interdefinition” (Thompson and Lindisfarne Association 217; Fels *in the wind* 48). He concludes by quoting Antonio Machado:

> Wanderer, the road is your footsteps, nothing else;  
> wanderer there is no pain,  
> you lay down a path in walking.  
> In walking you lay down a path  
> and when turning around  
> You see the road you’ll  
> Never step on again.  
> Wanderer, path there is none,  
> Only tracks on ocean foam.

Importantly for Valero, this action is not a mirroring but an act of creation. The path is laid down, is created by walking. It is in embracing the liminal passage through the abyss of unknowing that art-making practices can be characterized as an epistemology. So more
precisely, art-making is an epistemology of *unknowing*. And here is my epiphany. That is it exactly, art is an epistemology of unknowing, and like the apophatic theological path that comes to the structural inadequacy of words to describe or contain the Divine, I come to name visual art as an epistemological apophatic way.

Art is active epistemology, as Cassirer says, an invented form in pursuit of deliberate self-knowledge, and as Aristotle affirmed, a means by which truth is attained. What previously we had no words for is made manifest. What is art’s value? To show, to make manifest, to realize, what one only inchoately, vaguely has intimations of: “to flare up like flame and make big shadows,” as Rilke puts it, that can be moved in (Rilke 166). To create images that others recognize as their own, that release understanding, that make sense of one’s life.

Launching into the terrifying and generative territory of unknowing, artists (even those who use words) experience a way of knowing that does not entail words. “I resorted only to deep contemplation, so while my thoughts roamed in language, the meanings lay beyond words” (Xingjian 93). As mentioned earlier, Wittgenstein held that it was entirely possible to know something without being able to say it, implying in agreement with Aristotle, that there exists more than one type of knowing.

A proposition is a picture of reality that reflects its situation and shows its sense (Wittgenstein *Tractatus* 24), but as we have seen, pictures do not only reflect reality; they shape reality as well (Gombrich 386). If propositional language is a picture of reality that excludes that which is literally unsayable, ‘the unsayable’ can still be made manifest. “There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical” (Wittgenstein *Tractatus* 89). Educator and theorist Stuart Richmond proposes that art, unlike descriptive or propositional language, can show that which is paradoxical and unspeakable, that which is beyond language. He describes the importance of Wittgenstein’s “logical itemization of the supposed deep structure of language as relevant for artists today, due to the ineffable quality that can only be shown common to life, ethics, aesthetics, and religion” (Richmond notes 82).

Visual art makes manifest through using distinct methodologies marked by attentiveness, embodied sense perception, indeterminacy, permeable boundaries, flexible purposing, interpolation and transmediation. Art and aesthetics are forms of
understanding whose form is not limited by discursive words or contained by them. Some things are poorly parsed with literal discursive texts, but might be available for release through material “texts”. Richter succinctly describes “painting as applied epistemology” (Richter 68). Making sense sometimes is marked by returning to one’s senses and to one’s embodied condition and the equally embodied material conditions in which one finds oneself. Art and aesthetics have an enormous capacity for identity construction and through catharsis transform and heal via a bodily experiential and interoceptic depth, completing rationality, leading to understanding and releasing forward momentum.

Curiously holding, intensely attending to the materially experienced liminal unknown—following the work while it transforms into an epistemological act, describes another form that self-emptying takes. I started this chapter by describing the self-emptying that dislodges the self—teaches it to sit quietly, and the decraction that by excising the self generates forward momentum. Lilburn believes if self-emptying is one’s compositional method, then that “gives birth to interesting art and a musical, morally attractive life” (Lilburn in Grimm and Lilburn 5). Murdoch sees the quality of attentiveness that artists cultivate as being a primer or first step towards a moral life and can determine one’s ability to act well when the time comes. “By the time the moment of choice has arrived the quality of attention has probably determined the nature of the act” (67). Trusting ones’ embodied material perceptual capacities, practicing self-emptying and leaning into the unknown has ethical as well as aesthetic implications.

The attention out of which poems form is the same as contemplative attention – I’m not saying they have the same object (though some have argued this), but the same form or grammar. The contemplative cannot say utterly what draws her, yet cannot deny that she is drawn, drawn, nongainsayably drawn; the poet doesn’t possess the poem, cannot say the poem until the poem moves toward him, does not know it until perhaps long after the poem has found speech, and even then, only a little. This experience of being drawn and being speechless, except when an invading language pries open your mouth, is the experience along the apohatic path. You’re caught, disarmed, hurt by a beauty; your life clusters around a wonderful wound. Repeatedly, in this state, you may try to climb outside the speeding, visited-on-you vehicle of speech – what gusts you along– and see exactly what it is but you can’t pull off the feat. Then it stops, the speaking stops; you step away from it and look at it – but still you may not be sure what it is. (Lilburn in Grimm and Lilburn 4-5)
Art-making and aesthetics, by virtue of their invitation to embodied perceptual attention, self-emptying compositional strategies and trust in the liminal unknown can be understood as an embodied epistemological, apophatic way.

Figure 10. *Listen: Craning into the Deer*, 15" x 30", encaustic on board
Liminal Flow

What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence.
(Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 89)

Figure 11. *Liminal State*, 60" x 60", encaustic on board
Being Becoming

You,
   (fathering me forth)
had skin on.

Midwife-ing me into being
   (third birth, in fact, a being truer to design)
you held my trembling
soul. And warmed me into life.

I,
   (terrified and frozen)
 Stayed.
But it took all my strength
to trust the process and
you.

Imagine my amazement
when later I discovered
   (working as You do, through those with skin on)
all those serendipitous, synchronistic events
   (flowing effortlessly as they did, instantaneously
   from the pick axe strike on the glass),
were not arranged but
You.

Cascading into place
my life seems strange.

Now,
I am without skin,
feeling peeled,
tender,
and breath caught at the unfamiliar
gurgle of joy.

praise
You.  
(Grimm, 2009)

In some ways language is an orientation, but the point is that once you
have oriented yourself, you then have to leap, you have to go
somewhere. And then the question is whether you go into the known or
into the unknown. (Gormley in conversation with Gombrich quoted in
Hutchinson 29)

Self-emptying orients us (language being of course a part of this orientation), releasing
energy and bringing us to the lip of liminality. After orienting oneself, being mindful and
curious to scrutinize both self and one’s situatedness in history, culture and society, the challenge of leaping beyond the security of known territory into the unspeakable, unpredictable ocean is the artist’s task. Lingering in familiar shoreline territory, defaulting to secure categorizations, relying on solutions offered by culture, peer group or intellectual data alone is one option for the cautious artist. The other is to plunge in, to leave behind security, risk exploring the unknown. But just how does one leap into that? Gormley maintains, “We need … means of transmission between one state and another” (Gormley in conversation with Gombrich as quoted in Hutchinson 26). As I have already suggested, plunging into the unknown means trusting the stop, exerting extended perceptual awareness, embracing loneliness, practicing self-emptying, enduring scrutiny, requires every critical tool at one’s disposal. Finally, the artist becomes poised, attentive to each moment, surrenders to silence and waits, entering a liminal zone of unfamiliarity, the edge of chaos, a third space. But how might we understand a liminal zone?

**Defining Liminality**

“Liminality” comes from *limen*, the Latin word for threshold, and was used by the French ethnologist Arnold van Gennep to denote the second of three stages found in almost all “rites of passage.” He noticed a common tripartite ritual form in most regions, cultures and historical times that mark events like birth, puberty, marriage, death, seasonal shifts and other life or community crises. “Rites of passage” and his identification of the threefold pattern into which the many and varied rituals fall is his phrase and unique contribution. *Rites of separation* (e.g. funeral), *transition or liminal rites* (e.g. pregnancy) and *rites of incorporation* (e.g. marriage) can be independent rites or can sequence together, beginning with “preliminal separation rites continuing into liminal rites of transition, and concluding with postliminal rites of incorporation (i.e. initiation rites). The middle liminal rite can be described as marking a state of social transition in which an individual is suspended for a time out of a particular identity but not yet incorporated into a new identity, an existence van Gennep named a “liminal” state. Hence a liminal event transitions the individual from one way of being over the threshold to another.

As Solon T. Kimball points out in the introduction to the 1960 English translation of van Gennep’s *Rites of Passage*, Van Gennep believed that regeneration was a fundamental

---

73 Like New Year celebrations.
individual and universal principle and that rites of passage were instrumental in renewing the spent energy in any system. He recognised this underlying pattern in religion, sociology and even science and believed it to be widely applicable in learning theory and change theory. “His study of initiation ceremonies holds implications for learning theory that have yet to be explored” (x intro by Solon T. Kimball in the author’s foreword). Van Gennep invites readers to “check it by applying the conceptual scheme of The Rites of Passage to data in his own realm of study” (Van Gennep xxv). Van Gennep would recognise Appelbaum’s articulation of the stop and its fundamental role in teaching and learning, as just such a case in point and as a potent indicator of liminal experiences and their value for learning theory. Appelbaum’s words (quoted earlier) “Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other” (15) describing the middle transition or liminal stage with precision and insight.

**Aesthetic Liminality**

Taking van Gennep up on his invitation, Victor Turner understood social ritual to be fundamentally performative and applied the tripartite liminal sequence to theatre, linking social drama with aesthetic drama. Located in lived experience, Turner understood liminality to be a dynamic and fluid generative process, a threshold into the betwixt and between, sparking carnivalesque, ludic, unpredictable and playful responses. In Victor Turner’s Last Adventure, Richard Schechner’s preface to Turner’s The Anthropology of Performance, performance is understood as a living example of ritual in/as action.

Turner taught that there was a continuous, dynamic process linking performative behaviour–art, sports, ritual, play- with social and ethical structure: the way people think about and organize their lives and specify individual and group values... Turner also insisted that experience be given its rightful cognitive and emotional place... He was seeking to specify the ways in which experience and liminality, ritual process and artistic ecstasy coincided. (Turner 8)

Although dislocation, disorientation, and disconnection are frequently experienced after separation in the middle stage of liminality, it is the experience of flow, mentioned by Turner and famously studied by Mihaly Csikszsentmihalyi in Flow, the Psychology of Optimal Experience, that is an especially prized part of art-making practice. An
experience of joy, creativity, and optimal human experience, flow is a highly focused, intense, enjoyable, automatic, effortless state of consciousness that is created by being stretched to one’s limit “in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile” (Csikszentmihalyi 3).

Artists, athletes, musicians, chess masters, and surgeons were the focus of his first study that led to understanding the internal state of consciousness that produces flow. Csikszentmihalyi found flow experiences to be characterized by matching of skills and action; immediate feedback; merging of action and awareness; exquisitely intense concentration; an overwhelming sense of at-right-ness and well being; a loss of self-consciousness; shifted experience of time; and autotelic experience (experiences that are valued for their own sake, perhaps the most direct and authentic way of explaining Kant’s disinterestedness).

Flow is an experience that artists will recognise, making things being, in turn, excruciatingly painful and filled with ecstasy. Turner refers to Csikszentmihalyi’s work identifying flow as being a characteristic of liminal experiences and certainly one of the ways that experience, liminality, ritual process and artistic ecstasy coincide.

I too am taking van Gennep up on his invitation, finding in liminality a potent frame with which to enter the wordless process of making art that is, in turn, infuriating, excruciating and ecstatic. I experience art-making as a liminal and a performative process (as Turner and Fels define performative); I “perform” privately in the studio, not for an audience, although performance artists do enact publicly and with their embodied presence, and recognise the tripartite almost ritual stages through which my idiosyncratic process usually flows.

**In the studio.** After being gone for a very long time cleaning up and organizing feels like such a relief. Piles of things to go through- sorting and throwing away- entire garbage cans full of stuff, paper, hand-outs, things no longer important. Stacking panels, organizing materials, gathering objects suddenly significant, cleaning tools, smelling the wax. I always clear the deck, as it were, before I begin a new series of work. Reorganize. Clean all horizontal surfaces- put away all that has built up in the previous flurry of activity. Take everything off the wall and slop on thick white paint. Make the whole room a clean white palette. Clear my head and clear the space. Prepare to enter the unknown. Make room for something new to grow.
Dancing between preparation and avoidance, I realize that what I am doing is a rite of separation. I intentionally journal, clean, organize, discard stuff, clear the deck of my cluttered thoughts and intentionally separate from other roles of my life, in order to focus, concentrate, pay attention and create. Journaling allows me to put all distracting thoughts aside, downloading emotions, worries and frustrations, freeing my mind for the considerations of form, line, material, theory, context and significance that rightly occupy my whole self in this place. Art history, art theory, cultural theory, knowledge about tools and materials, awareness of one’s situatedness in time and context, culture and society, are studied, scrutinized, then indwelt, allowed to recede in consciousness, ready at hand if and when needed. Following in turn the content, the context, the materials, the questions, the uncomfortable pauses, the odd whisper that pulls forward, the unlikely inklings, the frustrating not-yet-ness, the inarticulate lack, the excruciating mistakes, my private enactment of making in the studio or gallery is a process that asks, inquires by re/searching, trying and discarding, destroying and reclaiming—creating something that was not there before. Slowly, things begin to connect, progress is made, halting discoveries sifted, a resonance in my sternum affirms a direction, momentum builds and the work takes an unexpected turn. At this point, I can default to doing the work that I thought I was doing, or I can be still, listen, exert all my perception and follow where the work leads. Now I begin to learn from the work itself, entering the liminal zone where self
falls away, time interstitially melts; I am mercifully released from self-awareness, energized and highly focused. Somehow energy is released that takes me somewhere, that I follow and use to work with. Finishing reluctantly for the day, I briefly believe the illusion that I could work on and on. As soon as I quit, tiredness descends, and I am grateful for the day. Re-encorporating into the dailyness of life, self-consciousness crashes, mundane tasks reappear, email requests blink urgently, appointments, meetings...laundry, time to become Mom-taxi once more. Tomorrow will tell whether this was gift or illusion. Time does always tell—and is necessary for the evaluative process. More often than not, the work is not quite as good or as bad as I hopefully thought (or dreaded) the previous day.

During the flow of work an internal freedom is cultivated and welcomed that young artists tend to shut down prematurely with an internal negative critical voice. Fear of failure, or of making mistakes, or of ruining a good start, are all indications of danger zones, not to be listened to. Evaluation is absolutely necessary; you just do not want to ruin a perfectly good liminal experience through listening uncritically to the internal judge in the liminal interval. Listening to internal critical, judging, negative or fearful thoughts is the fastest way to shut down this generative process. In his Nov 2010 TedTalk, surgeon, researcher and musician Charles Limb confirms that during creative acts self-monitoring lateral prefrontal cortical activity turns off while self-expressive medial prefrontal cortical activity turns on. His findings indicate that in order “to be creative you have to have this weird dissociation in your frontal lobe, one area turns on and a big area shuts off so that you are not inhibited, so that you are willing to make mistakes, so that you are not constantly shutting down all of these new generative impulses.” Evaluation comes later in the third phase of reincorporation. In the third phase assessment does happen, sometimes judging the work to be inadequate, sometimes successful. But reflection is a separate process from the liminal stage itself. Fels calls this revisiting reflection “mapping-in-exploration” (Fels in the wind 140).

I propose that creative acts of art-making follow a liminal pattern—they unfold much like an aesthetic ritual with three distinct phases, echoing van Gennep’s social ritual. Like the moon, these phases occur and reoccur. Separation from the dailyness of ordinary life (through journaling or cleaning or other acts) is the first phase, transition to the liminal phase (through sitting still, looking at the image, working and reworking, usually marked
by losing track of time, etc.) is the second, with reincorporation back into ordinary life (through evaluation and exhibition) marking the third phase of the aesthetic ritual that parallels van Gennep’s social ritual. This tripartite liminal structure occurs repeatedly throughout the art-making process, marking aesthetic practice and serving as a key to understanding from the maker’s vantage point, the release of energy and power of aesthetics to unsettle, change, inspire and create.

At the end of his life, Turner’s active searching led him to investigate the relationship between body, brain and culture, seeking a crossing or crux point between ritual, religion and science manifesting in social, religious and aesthetic practice. He believed the brain to have liminal capacities, a belief that now with new brain imaging technologies scientists are actively researching and bearing out (Brewer et al. n. pag.). Turner suspected the brain was capable of a coadaptation of genetic and cultural information (that creates the possibility for the brain to transcend both genetics and culture) through which new cultural knowledge could be generated. “Ritual is not necessarily a bastion of social conservatism; its symbols do not merely condense cherished sociocultural values. Rather, through its liminal processes, it holds the generating source of culture and structure” (Turner 11).

Hence it is precisely through the liminal suspension of unknowing, through “freefalling into the interstices between the real and not yet real worlds where absence becomes present” (Fels in the wind 57), that art can be the generating source of culture and structure. The liminal process, suspended between what is not yet and what is, invites the unselfconsciousness that for Weil releases energy otherwise occupied by the ego, constituting for van Gennep the source of renewing the spent energy in any system.

**Liminal Knowing**

Artists engage in art-making practices in order to make sense of things. Artists enact as an act of inquiry, not to make what they have previously figured out in their heads, echoing safe solutions, parroting existing culture, but by virtue of the liminal tripartite structure artists enact to generate new cultural understanding; they invite new ways of engaging with the known. As outlined in the previous chapter, it is in the transition between knowing and unknowing, between leading and following, that art-making becomes more than expressing something one knows and becomes an epistemological
means of understanding. It is by virtue of the liminal structure itself, by “laying down a path in walking” as Varela phrases it, or by “probing blindly, gently, searching with the delicacy of a worm, surgeon’s probe or miner’s pick,” as Dillard describes the crucial shift, that the liminal zone is entered and generates something surprising. Andy Goldsworthy says, “Learning and understanding through touch and making is a simple but deeply important reason for doing my work” (Friedman, Goldsworthy and Adams 196), underscoring the role of embodied liminal unknowing in his process.

Goldsworthy’s site-specific work is internationally acclaimed. He often journeys to remote locations, only works with materials found on site, uses no tools but his own hands, and from an intimate reading of the site/environment (including weather, tides, time, etc.) follows where the pieces lead, then witnesses the site reclaiming the work. He explains:

I could not possibly try to improve on Nature. I’m only trying to understand it, be involved in some of its processes. I often work through the night with snow or ice, to get temperatures cold enough for things to stick together. You approach the most beautiful point, the point of greatest tension, as you move towards daybreak: the sunlight which will bring the work to life will also gradually cause it to fall apart.

(Friedman, Goldsworthy and Adams 196)

Installation/performance/concept artist Wolfgang Laib brings materials like pollen, painstakingly gathered by his own hand, sometimes over several seasons, indoors into gallery or cathedral spaces, sifting stunningly vivid matte yellow squares or tiny cone shaped piles, their sheer material potency utterly activating the surrounding space with presence. His profound respect for ordinary materials like pollen, rice, milk (each with multiple layers of cultural association) and his deliberately slow ritualistic, excruciatingly ascetic process of making—whether sanding, collecting pollen, or pouring milk—infuses ordinary materials with incredible and ultimately indescribable presence. His respect for material and his exacting processes reveal the liminal process of making, inviting a liminal experience for the viewer.

Through immersing oneself in the rituals of the studio or site; being saturated in the history, theories and themes of cultural discourse; profoundly respecting the miracle that materials are, following new ideas into the unfamiliar; trusting the process of unknowing; keeping the process open and receptive; trusting one’s embodied perceptual knowing; and presenting the work or documentation of the work in gallery or other set-aside
space, an artists’ processes reveal the three phases of the liminal structure: separation, transition and re-incorporation.

Liminal experiences can be public or private, secret, individual or communal, and can be experienced in activities like sports, individual exercise, yoga practices, meditative practices of all descriptions and cultural pursuits such as theatre and art-making. Historically liminal experiences have been intentionally cultivated and are variously named as moments of recognition, the spontaneous *communitas*, Freud’s *oceanic experience*, yogic *ecstasy* and *samadhi*, Christian *Union mystica*, Zen *satori* (integrating flash), Quakers *inner light*, Buber’s *I Thou*, experiences of *knowing, enlightenment, suchness, kairos*, the *interstitial*, the *Trickster*. There are many, many names, in short, for liminal experiences. Turner speculated that they all had common origins in how the experience of ritual stimulates the brain.

To this list of ancient technologies of the soul, I add drawing and other studio practices that focus concentration and invite the artist to enter this experiential zone. The “joker in the anthropological act” play is especially uneasily explained by linear methods, its ludic recombination of familiar elements, even mistakes, unsettle and surprise by its generative production of arbitrary patterns. Sometimes the work artists do in the studio is described as play, although many artists reject this word choice as dismissive of the real effort, energy and re/search involved. Liminal processes both deconstruct and reconstruct, generating new patterns of cultural knowledge marked by an experiential flow quality and an altered experience of time.

Rites of passage, initiation rites, accidents, intense moments of joy or fear or pain, catastrophes, any of the “limiting crisis” experiences described by Richard Rohr, or the “catastrophic time” outlined by Alphonso Lingis (154) can also be catalysts for liminal experiences. The bombing of the World Trade Centre on Sept 11, 2001 (commonly spoken of as 9/11, the month and day of the bombing which spelled the international code for emergency) provoked a liminal experience for many. A *Globe and Mail* headline the next day heralded the end of irony and of innocence and commented that the U.S. would never again be the same. After the planes crashed, the towers fell and the dust settled, life seemed different and irony soured. Like the *cataleptic knowing* identified by Martha Nussbaum (discussed in chapter two), liminal experiences change people and communities, sometimes instantaneously, sometimes over an extended period of time.
So too do mystical experiences. Dorothee Sollee accords them the power to strip away the veil of triviality that she saw as characterizing popular cultural discourse at the beginning of the 21st Century (Soelle). I expect Turner would agree and further would account for the power of mystical, “limiting crisis” (Rohr), catastrophic (Lingis) and cataleptic (Nussbaum) experiences by citing their liminal structure. And also by virtue of their liminal structure they are ripe for generating new cultural knowledge, new understandings via the arts.

**Apophasia**

Philosopher and founder of deconstruction Jacques Derrida surprisingly developed an interest in the apophatic mystical tradition in his later life, weaving liminal links that for me connect aspects of wordlessness, unknowing, deconstruction and painting. From the Greek word *apophasis*, meaning negation, apophatic mysticism stresses that discursive words are inadequate to describe God, God’s attributes or the mystical experience. Examples of the apophatic tradition are the *Tao Te Ching* (*6th* century B.C.E.) and the writings of Dionysius the Areopagite (*5th-6th* century A.D.) *Sauf le nom* was a dialogue on negative theology generated by a colloquium organized by the Calgary Institute for the Humanities in Canada. Derrida had been invited to respond to the presented papers but was unable to attend as his mother was dying. While he waited at her bedside in France, sentinel to his mother’s liminal passing, he read the mystical poems of Angelus Silesius and the manuscript from the Calgary conference. Silesius, physician, priest, mystic and religious poet, was an exponent of the way of unknowing, the apophatic way of negative theology. In his poem *Cherubic Wanderer* he invites the initiate into a liminal experience by listening for the voiceless voice:

```
Friend, let this be enough; if you wish to read beyond,
Go and become yourself the writ and yourself the essence. . .   (6:23)

Nothing becomes what is before: if you do not become nothing,
Never will you be born of eternal light.      (6:130)
```

The rendering of oneself by reading beyond reading, reaching beyond legibility, beyond the final signature, embracing the seemingly impossible, stretching beyond the boundary of the possible, Derrida thought it to be “strangely familiar to the experience of what is called deconstruction” (Derrida et al. 43) observing that “this apophatic boldness always
consists in going further than is reasonably permitted. That is one of the essential traits of all negative theology: passing to the limit, then crossing a frontier” (36).

This description of the essential traits of the apophatic tradition, though Derrida likened it to deconstruction, bears a remarkable similarity to the liminal tripartite structure. Derrida’s interest in the edge of language, in interrogating the limits of language’s outermost edge, echoes Wittgenstein’s concluding thoughts in the *Tractatus* and uncannily recalls Weil’s and Xingjian’s double movement and the liminal pattern that van Gennep identified as having the capacity to renew spent energy, a way of knowing that entails passing through unknowing.

There is only the edge in language…at the edge of language would then mean: “at the edge as language,” in the same and double movement: withdrawing [derobement] and overflowing [debordement]. But as the moment and the force, as the movements of the injunction take place over the edge [par-dessus bord], as they draw their energy from having already taken place—even if it is a promise. (Derrida *Name* n.pag.)

In retrospect, throughout his career Derrida’s work complicated and blurred boundaries between many disciplines—science, poetry, theatre, art and literary criticism, to name only a few. So it ought not surprise us that he continued to shake up siloed disciplines by including the contemplative mystical tradition in his investigations, finding surprising, generative, ludic and liminal connections.

Much earlier, Derrida recognized the limitation of words when attempting to circumscribe visual art in the *Truth in Painting*. Using metaphors of matte board (passé-partout is French for the space between the frame and the image, the pristine matte board that encircles and sets the image apart), and of the *circle and abyss*, Derrida circles around painting, again and again pointing to the insufficiency of word to cross this gap. “Here it is done in painting: and not in discourse” (6) asserting that form can be beyond saying, philosophical words “enclose art in its circle” (23), but can only reproduce the limit of their own discourse and have as their aim the “subordination of all the arts to speech” (23). Again and again Derrida prods the edge of painting, “the partition of the edge is perhaps what is inscribed and occurs everywhere [se passé partout] in this book; and the protocol frame is endlessly multiplied in it, from *lemmata* to *parerga*, from *exergues* to *cartouches*.” Between the outside and the inside, “it situates between the visible edging and the phantom in the centre, from which we fascinate” (12). Derrida’s interests
and vocabularies overlap, overlaying one another; deconstruction, painting and apophatic experience share common properties that transcend the capacity of discursive words. Like Wittgenstein, Derrida investigates the edge of painting, using framing devices as a means of coming near to what words are ill-suited to describe.

Derrida was fascinated by apophatic wordlessness in language and in painting. Around the image is silence. Around and through the image is an apophatic interval, a liminal gap. Derrida credits Cezanne's brushstroke [trait] with opening the abyss, while Heidegger speaks of the stroke as holding together the opposite edges of the abyss. Canadian poet Tim Lilburn, quoted earlier, maintains that the attention required to compose poetry has the same form or grammar as that of contemplative attention and names both processes as apophatic.

For the maker, the gap/abyss/liminal zone cannot be bridged over but must be dived into headlong, being itself the source of creating new cultural understandings and the generation of energy with which to do the artistic work. “It's enough to say: abyss and satire of the abyss” (Derrida 34). Discursive, analytic word can satirize but not grant entry to understanding and insight, but possibly the brushstroke can. Making images entails going into the gap, and listening, practicing embodied receptive awareness.

Annie Dillard also speaks of the gap; not going up into the gaps she maintains, not embracing liminal apophatic unknowing is the mark of a false prophet.

Ezekiel excoriates false prophets as those who have “not gone up into the gaps.” The gaps are the thing. The gaps are the spirit’s one home, the altitudes and latitudes so dazzlingly spare and clean that the spirit can discover itself for the first time like a once-blind man unbound. The gaps are the clefts in the rock where you cower to see the back parts of God; they are the fissures between mountains and cells the wind lances through, the icy narrowing fiords splitting the cliffs of mystery. Go up into the gaps. Squeak into a gap in the soil, turn, and unlock-more than a maple—a universe. (Dillard Pilgrim 269)

Derrida similarly connects the experience of the abyss with truth telling. “If the phrase “the truth in painting” has the force of “truth” and in its play opens onto the abyss, then perhaps what is at stake in painting is truth, and in truth what is at stake (that idiom) is the abyss” (Derrida Truth 6).
As unlikely as it seems, I am here weaving together sources from a wide range of disciplines: anthropology, mystical theology, and cultural theory, applying apophatic methodologies and experiential models of liminality to the artistic process and aesthetics. Like Turner, I am looking for instances where artistic ecstasy and liminal experience overlap. For the artist, liminal and flow experiences are two characteristics that describe art-making from inside of the ocean of aesthetics. Rather than bridging over the abyss, artists dive into the abyss, and only after the fact, haltingly give the experience words by going back to the island/circle, to conflate Wittgenstein’s and Derrida’s metaphors. And although discursive words may be insufficient, something is enacted during the liminal interval that surprises the artist and changes her, that she learns from. During the experience one does not lose oneself. One’s identity is kept intact; since it is impossible to get entirely behind one’s situatedness in context and culture, one cannot get lost in a liminal experience or stay suspended indefinitely. One does eventually re-enter ordinary time, reincorporating and reaggregating, transitioning back. To use a psychological vocabulary, one’s ‘small self/ego/culturally constructed self can be productively dislocated, stretched, and challenged (which for Weil releases locked in energy), while the ‘large self/essence remains intact, is rendered more clearly, understood, seen perhaps with an unfamiliar start. One might say that art is enacted through the process of paying attention into the gap between perception and categorization, fully inhabiting the free play of the imagination. To continue Kant’s model, moving too quickly into categorization or solution curtails inquiry and usually results in stereotype, bridges over the generative liminal interval. New cultural knowledge and understandings are generated through the liminal passage. Listening to the intellect alone will only reiterate what is already known.

Silence

The experience of silence, inner stillness, surrounds the process of making, accompanying artists into and through the liminal tripartite abyss. Silence is a sure indicator of apophatic epistemological potential.

In the studio. I have been working for months now, daily, seemingly getting nowhere, frustrated and unsatisfied with everything and am now simply sitting, looking, at a loss to know what to do. All my investigations are leading to dead ends, nothing; it all looks terrible. I want to quit, leave, go on holiday, take a trip.
Laying gold leaf into negative spaces and layering drawings with encaustic, and oil paint are creating lush, but somehow... too organic... boneless images; the surfaces are beautiful but in an annoying way. Cloying, not truthful, or real, or authentic... the work has no presence. Cannot get it to sing. Then today I just happened to randomly lean a drawing beside a plate of steel and am stunned at how the juxtaposition of the minimal black mill scaled surface of steel changes the drawing. It stops me, stuns me into silence. Wow. It is making the figure so much more fragile, and flesh-like, but also stronger; how is it doing that? Both figure and steel have gained presence. I sit and look for a very long time. Finding more plates of steel, I tentatively begin juxtaposing planes of this material with other drawn figurative surfaces and in each case the drawn encaustic surface is transformed, is totally changed. Speechless, I am buoyed up by this aesthetic accident, amazed, and feel the longed for surge of energy building. Contrasting the simple silent plane of steel with the beeswax figurative surface heightens the corporeal presence of the figure. Amazing. Somehow the steel is giving the figure bones...

Within liminal unknowing one practices excruciating active receptivity until one is wakened with a start. Reengaging proprioceptive and interoceptive awareness, welcoming embodied perceptual searching along with conceptual formulation, sight is resensitized through an active concentration of awareness. Separation, the first stage in the liminal process, breaks with prevailing structure, stops what comes before and breaks automatic responses, onrushing preconceptions and familiar solutions. Through heightened perceptual awareness and self-emptying eventually one encounters interior stillness, silence, within the tripartite liminal structure. When it happens and how is always a surprise but it is normally in the midst of making, well before the third stage of re-incorporation. Canadian poet Lorna Crozier74 speaks of silence as surrounding both the beginning and the end of a work of art and quotes Nietzsche, who believed that most people do not like to be alone and dread silence as they are terrified that something will be whispered in their ear. Artists are those people, she goes on to say, who wait in silence, with fierce attentiveness, for that whisper. Despite the recurrent urge to take flight, knowing that once the liminal zone is entered, time inexplicably and inevitably shifts from kronos to kairos, unexpected solutions arise, and the artist experiences flow.

Agnes Martin speaks of the generative relationship between experiences of silence and her artwork. "My interest is in experience that is wordless and silent, and in the fact that this experience can be expressed for me in artwork which is also wordless and silent" (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 172). But silence is generally thought of

74 As heard in a 2008 interview on CBC Radio 1 program North by Northwest with Cheryl MacKay.
as uncomfortable, impossible, and sometimes even terrifying. When Senator Romeo Dallaire, the retired Canadian general who led the ill-fated United Nations force during the genocide in Rwanda, returned to Canada, the hell he experienced haunted his every waking moment. Fearing sleep he could not stand the loudness of silence. As Crozier points out, even though most people find silence uncomfortable if not terrifying, amongst artists one finds hunger for silence (and the longed for whisper) and thus one finds the cultivation of methodologies of the studio that are designed to help cultivate silence.

Attentive listening, understood in this way, is of course a political act, drawing one closer rather than farther from one’s context and community. Canadian artist Betty Goodwin cultivates waiting in silence, listening nightly to the news as a way of sensitizing herself to the condition of human beings in this present day. As she watches the news, she attends to the global brutality (that she says has gotten worse since Goya’s Day) mediated through TV, where wars and famine are spliced impossibly with toothpaste and hair conditioner advertisements. Reading Kafka, she affirms that waiting is a meaningful practice, integral to the process of making. Her sound installation Bound Voices uses recorded fragments of Samuel Beckett’s poetry: “it will be the silence-broken”. (Bélisle, Goodwin and Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal)

“You know Erica, silence is not even possible,” a musicologist colleague of mine indignantly says. “Manufactured noise is a constant of urban experience, lawnmower, traffic, chain saw, tractor, airplane, helicopter are all around us. We cannot ever get away from noise. Even nature is really really noisy.” Increasingly auditorily announced in nature too. Ever-faster cuts, ever louder sound tracks, emails, tweets, twitters, Facebook and an impossible explosion of social media sites on the internet and hand held devices occupy our increasingly digitally dominated life, an illusory simulacra existence of the Western and increasingly global world. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard’s work discusses the dominance of consumer culture and the false illusion of freedom it gives. He described our reality as increasingly superficial and digitally manufactured and as increasingly satisfied with simulated feelings and experiences (like Second Life, a game in which people create their own ulterior selves) that eclipse ordinary life. The hyper-reality of mall culture, constructed amusement park spectacles and the mass-produced images of TV, film, and advertising media bombard the senses and preclude internal stillness. How is it possible to cultivate inner attentiveness amidst such distractions?

In our increasingly frenetic, busy, noisy, IPod infused existence, the silence is indeed broken. How it is possible to cultivate internal stillness? Where can one go to experience
silence? Lilburn and others model retreating to marginal forgotten places. Regularly going away on retreat is a practice described by Bill Viola as a critical generative part of his creative process.

Dorothee Soelle speaks of the trivialization of life as being a major distorting force that characterizes western society, prescribing mysticism as a discovery, submerged in happiness. “I think that every discovery of the world plunges us into jubilation, a radical amazement that tears apart the veil of triviality” (Soelle 89). The problem is not the various new technologies of communication. The problem is simply the eclipsing and forgetting of practices of internal attentiveness that have been historically valued as necessary to living well, and that are also necessary for making art. Finding distractions from the interior life is not a new phenomenon. At the end of his life, Foucault was curious about technologies of the self, internal practices engaged in throughout history, capable of changing one’s perception of reality and in constructing the self.

The silence that Crosier says artists long for has nothing to do with being muzzled or silenced. It is not passive but active as is suggested by Soella’s title *Mysticism and Resistance*. To immerse oneself in silence calls one forward to action, a reality both the contemplative and the artist know, and both are generative to the degree that the liminal process itself fuels them. Engaging in the tripartite liminal process fuels one to speak, to act, to paint, to write, to resist superficiality and brutality, to watch the news as a nightly ritual, and then to enact in the studio, in order to come to insight.
Waking Up

There are, indeed, things that cannot be put into words. They make themselves manifest. They are what is mystical.

(Wittgenstein, Tractatus 89)

The most important part of education—to teach the meaning of to know.

(Weil Waiting for God the last statement in her notebook)

Out of the stop, this long extension into silence in the midst of making manifest, something surfaces, is awakened and is brought to birth. Practicing self-emptying and attentive lingering in liminal unknowing fuels action/enactment/birth, insight and
understanding. Silence, liminal stillness and practicing embodied re-enchantment of perceptual awareness releases in both art-maker and viewer the potential to wake, unsettle, change, empower and enact.

I began by defining aesthetics as a verb, the opposite of anaesthesia. In this final chapter I turn to waking up and natality, looking to Arendt’s theory of natality and Maxine Green’s focus on wide-awareness to theorize aesthetics as an active meaning making practice. Through active receptivity artists make manifest what Derrida, using the vocabulary of birthgiving: conception, formation, gestation, and labor, names as the “as yet unnameable which begins to proclaim itself” (Derrida Writing 293). Art-making is a form of knowing and understanding precisely in its embrace of not knowing. Aesthetics is active, practice-based, locating inquiry and research from within the act of making, coming to understanding by trusting unknowing and uniting embodied sensory, perceptual and reasoned knowing.

Figure 13. Out of the silence you can make a promise that it will kill you to break, 15" x 30", encaustic and steel
Natality

In the beginning, there can be only dying, the abyss, and the first laugh.
(Cixous and Jenson 41)

Figure 14.  *Crown*, 30” x 22”, 1993, graphite and gold on “Arches paper
A masterful exemplar of internal attentiveness is Helene Cixous, who describes in *Coming to Writing*, just such an awakening in her creative process as a profound birthing. Raw, forceful and devoid of sentimentality, self-emptying mindfulness produced a text that extended far beyond the discursive and surprised even Cixous. Within it many others recognise their own experiences.

I am dead. There is an abyss. The leap. That someone takes. Then, a gestation of self—in itself, atrocious. When the flesh tears, writhes, rips apart, decomposes, revives, recognizes itself as a newly born woman, there is a suffering that no text is gentle or powerful enough to accompany with a song. Which is why, while she is dying—then being born—silence.

(Cixous and Jenson 36)

Resisting being contained in her writing by well-worn linguistic structures, discursive boundaries and accepted formula, Cixous digs deep within herself, radically revisioning writing to make space for her experienced reality, erupting into a style she calls *écriture feminine*. Beginning with absence and silence, in the abyss Cixous describes profound self-emptying as being the condition that makes writing necessary and possible. Self streams away, leaving the panicky sensation of being lost.

That is when you are unwoven weft, flesh that lets strangeness come through, defenceless being, without resistance, without batten, without skin, inundated with otherness, it’s in these breathless times that writings traverse you, song of an unheard—of purity flow through you, addressed to no one, they well up, surge forth. (Cixous and Jenson 39)

Cixious describes something I recognise, a creative resurrection from death; freed from fear of the abyss, a leaping, daring, surrendering, vulnerable plunge into terror filled-freedom and a surge of energy marked by laughter. Utilizing energized laughter, Cixous calls women to writing, freeing themselves from repression through and by expression. Through risking self-emptying vulnerability and honesty in the act of making, a new text (whether word based or visual based, it does not matter) is enacted. Through making from an empty place of honesty and vulnerability, new knowledge is realized; understood, birthed. A liminal tripartite process that models radical self-emptying, Cixous’s laughter inaugurates rebirth, destabilizes boundaries, renews, reenergizes spent structures and surprises even the artist with something that was not there before. Here is another manifestation of the liminal tripartite process. What Cixous describes is, I
believe, readily available for experience by both men and women, and although she frames it in specifically gendered terms\textsuperscript{75}.

Starting something new, enacting, interpreting, making, shaping, coming to insight, paying attention through trusting one’s embodied perceptual knowing, working within the cultural context and in the material realm is what artists do. For newly forming artists it is crucial to learn both interior and exterior practices; strategies of interpretation, practices of the studio, and habits of the heart are all necessary in order to flourish as art-maker. In particular, focussing one’s attention toward the internal practice of self-emptying creates an internal clearing, a vacuum that generates energy for something new to be born. Uncomfortable initially, once the internal clearing is achieved, it is a practice as natural and normal as breathing or giving birth; it is listening with one’s whole self, with one’s mind, one’s memory, one’s body and all one’s energy and focus. It is paying attention and practicing detached mindfulness, trusting what the senses reveal and indwelling art history, theory and one’s cultural situatedness.

Once stopped, artists in all stages of their practice pay attention, practice active receptivity, expectantly waiting in order to address the difficulty of making the “intangible tangible” (Berger 200) as John Berger describes it. Pauses are necessary in order to create “a cold form to contain our fervent content” (Berger 200) and are necessary for all artistic endeavours, despite the multiplicity of different contents that fill those pauses (64). But whatever the content, what is enacted is something that “others have felt but never known,” as Berger describes it. Cezanne sought out faithfulness to his “little elusive sensation …[staring] at the Mont St. Victoire in order to add to the truth that was knowable by human intellect and senses” (Berger 143). Cultivating an internal practice of attentive stillness and waiting is the engine for one’s art-making. Without waiting, mindful attentive waiting, nothing is awakened and nothing worthwhile is enacted.

Gormley radically trusts his embodied experience and calls for a reinforcement of the direct embodied perceptual experience that fuels Cixious’s text:

\begin{quote}
I think that the authority has shifted from an external validation to an internal one and I would regard that as the great joy of being an artist. The liberation of art today is to try to find, in a way, forms of expression that exist almost before language and to make them more apparent. I
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{75} The view that the birthing Cixious describes can be experienced by both men and women is certainly a contested one.
think that in an information age in a sense, language is the one thing that we have plenty of, but what we need is a reinforcement of direct experience.

(Gormley in conversation with Gombrich in Hutchinson 28)

Different artists reinforce direct experience in a variety of ways. Celeste Snowber calls for deep listening (Snowber Landscapes 3) invites attention to interior subjective, bodily sensations, cultivating “the entire body as receptive space” (31). Re-awakening to data marginalized by a preoccupation with objective knowledge, “such attention provides loving kindness towards our bodies” (32) and in so doing “cultivates a physicality of presence and a heart which can have the capacity to attend to mystery in the midst of the ordinary” (38), releasing a potent source of data. “It is in moving that I find stillness” (127) she says. The body is Snowber’s subject, form and content, dance improvisation is her process, not knowing, her precondition for discovery. Jana Milloy radically plunges inward:

I write words not from a stream of consciousness, there are currents pulsing inside the body that invite the consciousness to consider, to contemplate, a visceral knowing before everything. A carnal ontology. And when it resurfaces into consciousness, it already is, it is here, still forming, but vital, pulsing, gasping the first breath, air all the way, I step into the lightest light. (Milloy 192)

Milloy’s embodied methodology renders somatic experience with poetic power. In a lecture at Cornell University Agnes Martin links inspiration with sensory awareness, regarding it as a common contemplative experience available to anyone at any time:

That which takes us by surprise—moments of happiness—that is inspiration...Many people as adults are so startled by inspiration...that they think they are unique in having had it. Nothing could be further from the truth. Inspiration is there all the time. For everyone whose mind is not clouded over with thoughts whether they realize it or not. Inspiration is pervasive but not a power. It is a peaceful thing. A consolation...Do not think it is unique. If it were unique no one could respond to your work. Do not think it is reserved for a few or anything like that. It is an untroubled mind. Of course we know that an untroubled state of mind cannot last. So we say that inspiration comes and goes but really it is there all the time waiting for us to be untroubled again...All the moments of inspiration added together make what we call sensibility. The development of sensibility...awakening to sensibility is the most important thing.

(Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 61-2)
What Cixous, Martin and Gormley trust and articulate—and what many artists simply tap into—is a radical acceptance/welcoming/curiosity about their incarnational perceptual being and knowing. Martin is dismissive of cultural and critical contents. On this point, I modify her position in my own making, researching and teaching practices. Theories remain vitally important, but they are allowed to recede. They are internalized and indwelt, surfacing in a way consistent with one’s active practice. Interoceptive embodied sense data (knowing that originates in one’s core and heart) is welcomed alongside reason of a more traditional kind and is allowed to influence the interpretive act. One way of knowing does not need to shut down another.

Unrivalled theorist of beginnings, Hannah Arendt’s lifelong work calls attention to the human capacity of distinct individuals to “start something new,” to act anew, unleashing unpredictable and unexpected consequences. Arendt names natality “the essence of education” (Arendt Between 174). Natality is experienced in the process of making art, and I intentionally nurture it in the process of teaching art at the tertiary level.

First day of the new semester. Gathering syllabi, notes, large ceramic water bowl, books and a stack of small square papers, I go up the busy stairs, through throngs of people, past walls plastered with new notices, announcements, words and images, jumbled layers vying hopefully for attention, open the door and survey the straight rows, neatly arranged. Exhaling audibly, I quickly rearrange the room in a circle; push tables and chairs into a ring, putting the ceramic bowl in the newly created clearing just as expectant faces start arriving. Tentative, talkative, laughing and nervous, scared, friendly, reserved, bored, extroverted wide-open faces and closed, soon they are all here and we can begin. Welcomes, introductions, you, me, the class...waitlists and prerequisites, I begin the conversation outlining the structure, goals, methodologies, expectations and assignments, set the stage. After the break, I pour water in the thick rough textured hand thrown bowl and start handing out small white squares of textured paper. Habits of the heart/strategies of the studio/interpretive inquiries, we name them all, curiosity, honesty, inquiry, inquisitiveness, re/search, theory, themes, context, discipline, hard work, disruption, disaster, silence and stuckness, frustration, chaos and calamity, attentiveness, analysis, everything can be used, everything but fear, that is. Fear shuts down. Paralyzes, and does not release, is not a help in the studio or in a life. I invite them to close their eyes and sit in silence for a moment, settle, breathe and consider what releases them to create and what hinders them, then write on the paper the fears, blocks, worries or issues that would hinder them this semester. While they are doing this I reach for the candle, realizing, with a lurch in my stomach, that I have forgotten it at home. After a couple of moments eyes start opening, and the silence is broken by scratching on paper, just as I remember an old lighter in the bottom of my computer bag. I repeatedly flick the lighter as one by
“Curriculum is embodied performance, a body/mind dance on the edge of chaos, in which space-moments of learning are realized and recognised” (Fels in the wind 161).

Central to Lynn Fels’ Performative Inquiry is that the newness of art is realized in the midst of enacting it. Per-form-ing is a cognitive action; being in motion engaging the act of forming and destroying form, art emerges out of trusting the process itself. Extending from Heidegger and Appelbaum, performative inquiry understands knowing as inseparable from being and creating, and further that the relations between these three are not linear; knowing does not lead inexorably to doing and being but that within the process of creating, knowing can be realized; it is by being attentive to gaps in knowledge, lacuna in lived experiences, unexpected complexity, even chaos and crisis, that avenues can open to new knowledge and unexpected moments of recognition.

In the studio knowledge is not regarded as ready-made but emerges from the complex mix of context, researcher/creator, participant/viewer and artwork/material/subject matter in the act of making. Fels defines performative inquiry as a means of using art (visual, theatrical or auditory) and its processes as a way of knowing, qualitative arts-based research that investigates the meaning-making that emerges out of trusting the artistic process itself, discovered in the midst of creating. Performative inquiry reanimates the relationship between analysis and action, theory and praxis, inextricably linking Heidegger’s knowing, being and doing through creative action. Bodily feelings, emotions and perceptions are considered meaningful content, inseparable from thought. These are welcomed as part of the research/creation process along with body/mind oneness, an unselfconsciousness the Japanese call shinshin; heart-mind oneness called kokoro; as well as grace, the intuition and the unknown. All are trusted as part of the research process. Disciplinary boundaries and forms are ruptured in welcoming intertextuality, non-linear and innovative investigations. “Performative inquiry,” Fels writes in the abstract of her doctoral dissertation, “is elusively and momentarily balanced on the ‘edge of chaos’ within the interstices of enactivism, complexity, interpretation, and performance” (Fels in the wind ii). With Aristotle, Fels theorizes the act of making as an enactment of potential– pure potential yearning towards form.
The pedagogical task at the tertiary level is, as I see it, to create the conditions that release the potential that yearns toward form, enable students to enact, creating sound unexpected, unpredictable work, forging rhizomatic relations as a/r/tographers Rita Irwin, Ruth Beer, Stephanie Springgay, Kit Grauer, GuXiong and Barbara Bickel (Springgay et al. (eds.) 205-220) name it. The task is to recognise Lynn Fel’s (Fels and Belliveau) unplanned performative encounters in the midst of creating, researching and teaching. In my own teaching, over the four years of a studio art program, the curricula invite students into a plethora of practices of embodied attentiveness that widen both their interior and exterior worlds. Out of interstitial intersections between interior and exterior, art arises that wakes up artist and viewer.

Hence the task for teaching art is to welcome, prepare, support and make space for the new without controlling the form. To do otherwise, as Arendt points out, is to destroy its very newness (Arendt Between 173-196). As Arendt frames it, human beings are always being born into the world. Newcomers in any context are not fully formed—they are in a process of becoming, and significantly, they are being introduced into a world that is also in a process of becoming. Newcomers enter a system that is fluid, constantly changing. This difficulty, like the task of jumping into a moving vehicle, is made more complex since amongst the many newcomers, any one of them can act and start something new, opening the self or the system to unpredictable outcomes. This aptly describes studio classes at the tertiary level where the newly emerging artist enters a contemporary art world that is in a constant state of flux.

This flux is inherently part of the ocean metaphor that I have been using, but similarly fluid is the rhizome metaphor that A/r/tographers Irwin, Beer, Springgay, Grauer, Xiong, Bickel, de Cosson and others draw from Deleuze and Guattari to illustrate their arts and education practice-based research methodology (Springgay et al. (eds.) 205-218). Like the fluidity of the ocean analogy, a rhizome has multiple entry points, resists linear sequences by constantly moving outward in web like (wave-like) profusions. A/r/tographers describe rhizomatic-interconnected networks that utilize the generative “interstitial spaces between thinking and materiality” (206). A/r/tographers similarly value the liminal “in-between where meanings reside in the simultaneous use of language, images, materials, situations, space and time” (Irwin and Springgay Being xix). For the large and growing community of A/r/tographers…
rhizomatic relationality affects how we understand theory and practice, product and process. Theory is no longer an abstract concept but rather an embodied living inquiry, an interstitial relational space for creating, teaching, learning, and researching in a constant state of becoming. For a/r/tographers this means theorizing through inquiry, a process that involves an evolution of questions. This active stance to knowledge creation informs a/r/tographer practices making their inquiries emergent, generative, reflexive and responsive. (Springgay et al. (eds.) 206)

In the visual art program at Trinity Western University, midwifing the new means initiating students into practices of the studio, exercising their embodied sensory perceptual and critical capacities, providing students with structure within which there is space to explore, create clearings, and inhabit the interstitial interrelationships and connections out of which art emerges. Creating a community of inquiry is key, cultivating collegiality, curiosity, trust, and honesty. Even in a first year foundations context, where the curriculum of visual exploration is relatively defined, there is ample space for new solutions and ways of working. Drawing practices, colour theory, compositional strategies, paradigms of art-making practice, perceptual, technical and conceptual ways of working, research practices, all typically part of a foundations program, are structures that unsettle preconceived notions, while being open enough to welcome surprising solutions. First year sets in motion foundational practices, art-making as a form of inquiry, form as embodied action as Eisner calls it\(^76\), asking questions as a research practice. Practices of perception are cultivated; perception can be practiced/honed, seeing can be widened, and insight can be realized. Second year focuses on art-making as an active embodied practice of forming with material. Art history, studio practices and skills are engaged, cultivating realizations of form as a visual language and as a legitimate means of scholarly research. Third year acknowledges the artist’s situatedness within culture and societal context, exploring art-making as a critical practice, and drawing on the intellectual realizations of contemporary cultural theory. The structure is widened, welcoming students to embrace/integrate foundations, skill development and embodied sensory perceptual attention with critical and cultural theory. By fourth year the possibilities are wide open to the student’s unique insight: a challenge that some embrace and that others fear. Drawing on a firm foundational base, grounded in active practices of the studio, situated within a context /culture, the student is supported in negotiating these complexities and speaking into culture with her own

\(^{76}\) In conversation with Lynn Fels.
voice. Complexity is integral; art-making is not just the emotions, not solely perception, not entirely the intellect, or theory, or cultural comment, but unique and unpredictable combinations of all these factors. The professor’s task is to set sequentially more wide-open goals, balancing structure and space until the student can handle fourth year artistic freedom. It means listening for the stops, recognising the crises that can become breakthroughs welcoming the new without controlling the form.

Olivia, normally enthusiastic, arrives dispirited today. She has been doing great all semester, her drawings improving amazingly each week. Pinning her 30” x 40” figure in motion drawing to the board, it is uncharacteristically weak. She explains her efforts, knowing it is not working. “I think I am going to start over” she says. “Well”, I pause, “perhaps not being happy with it might open space for you to try something you might not otherwise risk. Why don’t you try working right over this initial effort? Since you are not happy with it now, you have nothing to lose.”

Lindsay is quiet and reserved and is making steady progress. Today she has brought in a suitcase to draw on, responding to the assignment – explore an unusual drawing surface, an object that inherently carries meaning. Good, she is focussed, having already has set up her working station, she is hard at work, ear buds help her concentrate, and she is already oblivious to the rest of the chatter and chaos in the room. Wendy on the other hand has been on my mind all week. Transferring in from another program, I do not know her art-making history, and her efforts have seemed thin. I am worried that she cannot handle the open-ended inquiry of the drawing projects and I am preparing to suggest to her a new sequence of drawing assignments designed to strengthen her technical abilities.

Braced and ready to start this conversation as she walks into the studio, I am stopped again. Relief floods me, and delight as she pins her identity and scientific looking/looking at science pieces to the wall. She has reworked each significantly, discovering surprising solutions in each case. Open and receptive, she too is relieved. Gone are her defensive attempts to justify her work. April is an exuberant soul, curious and willing to explore and risk. She has gotten over the first critique; I misread her openness and maturity and she was devastated that the energy of her inquiry was not enough to support the final results. She too has worked and reworked her drawing surface until the layers are resonant with life.

Diana has made steady progress since her huge breakthrough of last semester, but I am attentive that she not stay with this insight overly long as she has other discoveries ahead. Jessica, having made an equally huge conceptual leap last week during the critique, now needs to shore up her technique. Aaron has almost entirely missed the point of this drawing inquiry. I am shocked and momentarily flummoxed as nearly every semester this open-ended project is embraced enthusiastically, generating strong work. Haltingly I try to find a different way to communicate with words the visual potential that he has missed. Rachel, as usual, has a million questions, wanting safe, well-defined perimeters and needs permission to dive into the freedom of her own choices/decisions. Monique has
totally ignored this project’s purpose but her drawing has an unmistakable power and energy not unlike Precycladic Greek sculpture....

The pedagogical structure ideally sets up parameters within which the student has ample space to explore, providing a full toolbox of technical, theoretical, cultural, practical and conceptual practices of the studio that widen perceptual, conceptual, embodied and affective attentiveness. Because art is a practice of making, an art program ideally creates an environment that provides the conditions to support creative flourishing, welcoming young artists not as we wish them to be but, as Arendt suggest, to see who we become in their presence. A creative community of inquiry is the goal. Inevitably the process of teaching studio classes at the tertiary level is chaotic, surprising and unpredictable, filled with the emergent frustrations and recognitions of each artist’s trajectory of learning. This complexity can rarely be controlled, despite the most carefully crafted interlocking series of assignments, visual research and readings. Insights are not so much orchestrated as witnessed and made space for in the moment; in educational contexts potent moments of learning on the “edge of chaos” require attentive listening and are named as performative encounters by Lynn Fels (Fels Complexity 73-98). Referring to Leonard Cohen’s song “Anthem,” Fels reminds educators to:

Release the desire for perfection; and to welcome instead the cracks that are in themselves generative, emergent action-sites of learning, illumination, recognition. The challenge for educators is to learn to embrace teaching as pedagogical action that permits cracks to appear in order for learning to happen. (Fels Complexity 75-6)

Canadian encaustic painter Tony Scherman refers to his work as an amalgamation of mistakes. Considering the swiftly changing, fluid environment of the contemporary art world that students are preparing to enter, Arendt’s and Fels’ insights can be daily pedagogical necessities.

Midwifing the new happens by proposing inquiries in which body, mind, heart, spirit and culture are thoroughly integrated. From within a solid foundational structure that makes space for new formulations, perception is widened and new recognitions are enacted. In the course of retracing his process of making while writing the book In Search of Form, Jack Shadbolt writes,

77 Art Matters series of invited lectures January 2012.
I became aware that the concepts towards which I had unconsciously been groping were, in fact, the basic concepts of art having to do with space, rhythm, shape, volume, articulation, structure, the nature of images and traditional vs. new approaches. This both chastened and reassured me. …I realized that originality does not lie in evading these common ideas but in understanding them so surely that one can work beyond them with a daring that is free from their otherwise too authoritative bondage. Hindsight has convinced me that the will can never do the work of the imagination, but it has also pointed up the corollary truth that imagination is unlikely ever to get a significant start until the conscious mind has worked it as far as possible to the edge of the known. Inspiration for the artist is probably less in dreaming than in visualizing extensions from tangible possibilities. (Shadbolt 235)

For the student, enactment requires a thorough grounding in all the foundational material, immersing oneself in the practices of the studio, widening perception, letting go of expectations again and again, learning the history of other visual makers and engaging cultural realizations and recognitions. Breaking through preperceptions—assumptions and the inertia of habit—being stopped, freefalling into the unknown, forming and destroying form to create something that was not there before, the student visualizes extensions from tangible possibilities, makes meaning in the material realm by constituting an experience. Fels theorizes cognition as active, occurring during the action of making. Performative Inquiry renders creativity as an action site of learning. Simultaneously through forming and through the destruction of form, new patterns of interrelationships emerge. Chaos and complexity contribute to releasing the inherent potential of not yet known worlds into being. It is in “communal and individual space-moments of possibility that performative inquiry seeks and maps, charting unexpected waters with the navigational skills honed by terror and risk and possibility” (Fels 55).

Each student enacts a potential they only inchoately sense as they stretch out from the predictable shores of known visual solutions to the edge of the unknown. Imagination kicks in most reliably once one has exhausted the possibilities of what the intellect knows. Understanding emerges in the midst of making and sometimes well after the piece is made. The student’s emerging visual voice is supported, while setting the standards increasingly higher and simultaneously asking the newly forming artist to “engage with what is not yet known” (Fels Complexity 74). Other disciplines require unique contributions at the PhD level, but in the studio we require this level of risk from our students routinely.
To fail in this task, whether institutionally or for one’s own art-making, is to invite sickness, leading to what Arendt called in 1952 a crisis in education (Arendt Between 173). Sickness occurs when the past is presented as a straightjacket, crippling the emerging form. When visual formula is canonized, not seen as a process of inquiry, the life drains out of the artist and the artwork. Art curricula at the tertiary level can be likened to giving the student a full toolbox, not a set of formulae. The student is initiated into the practices of the studio and needs plenty of possibilities in terms of tools, techniques, models, theories, histories and practices as a springboard from which to leap. But leaping into new territory is the goal. Similarly disfiguring is the Dionysian fallacy that violence and chaos, “annihilation of the ordinary bounds and limits of existence …this chasm of oblivion separates the worlds of everyday reality and Dionysian reality” are necessary (Nietzsche 59). Nietzsche goes on to offer art as saviour and healer: “the sublime as the artistic taming of the horrible, and the comic as the artistic discharge of the nausea of absurdity” (60). What is missing is the essential self-emptying gesture. Xingjian refers to Nietzsche in his Case for Literature, suggesting a link between the chaos ensuing from misguided self appointed “Supermen,” and the misreading of a “very egotistical philosopher” (Xingjian 32), preferring to locate art-making as a small humble gesture, “it is this weak voice that is the most authentic” (32).

I propose that without lingering in silence, practicing active receptivity or self-emptying, enacting unscrutinized freedom can produce a birth that is still born. With Thomas Merton, Tim Lilburn and Kant, I find within aesthetic experience a more humble means accessed through attention, silence, unknowing and self-emptying rather than self-aggrandizement or violence, something that transcends the sensible order (in which however it has a beginning) that is key to living with one’s eyes wide opened and in enacting what I am calling the aesthetics of attentiveness.

Experienced as coming from nowhere, moments of clarity, clearings, inspirations, much prized momentum can feel like uncontrollable gifts contributing to a reluctance to scrutinize the process itself for fear that it will dissolve and never again recur. Feeling insecure in one’s inability to call these birthings forth at will, the process can feel wholly other, not definable, and uncontrollable, but in her lecture quoted earlier in this section, Martins recommends the untroubled mind or mindfulness will recall inspiration’s presence. When somehow pride is dislodged and let go, an immediate change, “free of pride … indescribable, a sudden joy in living” ensues. Moments of inspiration alternate
with feelings of inadequacy and defeat, which Martins describes as the more natural state of mind for artists. Persisting despite feelings of inadequacy, fear, defeat, disappointment or helplessness, she says, is essential for creative work. But the moments of perfection, as she calls them, are indescribable glimpses:

In an instant we can see the road ahead free from all difficulties and we think that we will never lose it again. All this and a great deal more in barely a moment, and then it is gone. But all such moments are stored in the mind. They are called sensibility or awareness” (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 62).

Occasionally these glimpses seem farther away the more familiar we are with them, explaining why making art seems at times so very hard, so disappointing, but this she insists is an illusion. Growing one’s capacity for awareness is all that is important. Keeping on in the midst of feeling defeated and abandoned is part of letting go of the self, as is feeling that one cannot take credit when one’s visual work does go well. Keeping on working, persisting when even hope is gone, is a necessary letting go. Resisting self-righteousness, the persistence of the judge, the chain of conventions, expectations of perfection, all these things need to be abandoned again and again in the process of making visual art. Feelings of defeat often call forth the best work.

Defeated, you will rise to your feet as is said of Dry Bones. These bones will rise again. Undefeated you will have nothing to say but more of the same. Defeated, you will stand at the door of your house to welcome the unknown, putting behind you all that is known. (Martin, Schwarz and Kunstmuseum Winterthur 70)

It has always been exceedingly difficult to cultivate silence and self-emptying attention, but this is, as Iris Murdoch sees it, an essential step in making the moral choices that reach beyond the avaricious tentacles of the self, connecting art-making with developing a moral compass. Rather than cultivating the gaze that dehumanizes, this new gaze embodies mindful awareness, a wide-awakeness and willingness to receive what has not yet arrived, fosters what Martin Buber refers to as an I-Thou, a reciprocal, equal, energized, seeing-as-interrelation that expands to seeing connections in rhizomatic fecundity. Cultivating self-emptying attentiveness allows the ego-driven “I” to slip, dislodging somewhat the tendency to default to preconceptions and familiar formulations. Attentiveness cultivates knowing situated in one’s core, in one’s embodied
self, via sensory, perceptual, interoceptic and proprioceptic attentiveness, the essence of what Baumgarten envisioned for his newly articulated science of the senses called Aesthetics.

A great deal of academic curriculum does not recognise the importance of being situated within our own bodies and contexts, and rather than cultivating/honing internal perceptual and affective knowing, develop methodologies that explicitly distrust sensory data and view it with suspicion. In a popular Ted Talks webcast, Sir Ken Robinson humorously describes most academic curricula as educating people from the head up and slightly to one side. The senses and perceptions have been seen as unreliable and as disenchanted, but increasingly this view is being questioned. By way of contrast, art-making practices require sensory perceptual wideness, active receptivity, gleaned from visceral, experiential unknowing; within the abyss is found a self-emptying space of fecundity. Birthing begins amid silence and self-emptying but results in laughter that generates forward momentum. Do not stay in silence. Reject muteness. Move forward. Risk speaking, making, naming. Realizations occur, “knowing” comes in a flash of recognition, a gestalt is realized in the midst of making and something new is welcomed.

Wittgenstein recognised an important connection between forward momentum and knowing when he observed, “But there is also this use of the word “to know”; we say, “Now I know!”—And similarly ”Now I can do it!” and “Now I understand!” …(such a sensation is, for example, that of a light quick intake of breath, as when one is slightly startled) (Wittgenstein Philosophical 51). The sudden experience of knowing or understanding generates energy and forward momentum that fuels work in the studio. The way is suddenly evident, and the work can be followed into a new place.

Teaching negative space today I found myself explaining the shift involved in seeing the un-nameable shapes adjacent to the positive forms by referring to Wittgenstein’s change of aspect. Showing students the well-known diagram of a rabbit that becomes a duck, and two profiles that become a vase, I explain what Wittgenstein named as a change in aspect; the shift that happens when we intentionally direct our attention to see the negative space as positive form in these famous illustrations, and we see an entirely different picture. The two aspects cannot be seen simultaneously but one can intentionally direct one’s attention and shift between the two views. Explaining that similarly, in order to render accurate form, one must shift attention to see and value the negative spaces. Suddenly we see both negative space and positive form and how they interlock on the picture.
In this first year foundations class students are astonished at how easily they can thereafter grasp and render form realistically.

A change of aspect is another way of describing this sudden knowing when the aspect dawns. Wittgenstein believed this phenomenon was inseparable from thinking, “I think it could also be put this way: astonishment is essential to a change of aspect. And astonishment is thinking” (Wittgenstein 246). Forward momentum fuelled in the midst of making is generated by realizations. Something must be enacted, embodied forth, or rot sets in and sickness results rather than life. Conversely, we have no words worth speaking or images worth making, until they are called out of us with a flash of recognition. Simone Weil believed simply that the method for understanding images and symbols was not to try to interpret them “but to look at them till the light suddenly dawns” (Weil as quoted by Zwicky 118). Weil continues by describing attentive looking as “Generally speaking, a method for the exercise of the intelligence, which consists of looking” (Weil as quoted by Zwicky 118). I experience the spontaneous change in aspect while critiquing student work as well as in the studio with my own work in progress. I also experience it with my own work after the initial making has been long completed.

In the studio. Barbara Colebrook Peace’s book has arrived! My work on the cover peeks through the brown paper. Later, at home reading the poetry, the last piece in the collection unhinges me, releasing deep sobbing tears that I do not understand. This oddly and annoyingly happens every time I read this particular poem. “Somewhere deep in me it is snowing…. I can’t hear the words…” (Colebrook Peace, 2008). The next month I was stopped, my heart stopped. In retrospect now two years after a heart attack and a year after a divorce, I understand the tiredness, the cathartic release and more about many of my own images. When re/searching/drawing/painting, however, I feel no emotion at all, being totally immersed and occupied by the strategies of the studio, painting a visual language my awareness is fully on the image following fleeting glimpses of reanimation where they lead, responding to form finding shape and being guided by a resonant internal assent and satisfaction. Meaning making without knowing, form unhinged from content while doing. Much has changed. The aspect shifted and suddenly I understood. With astonished understanding came energized forward momentum. Opening packages of steel stored patiently on the outside studio patio a whole year while I recovered, I find answers etched into steel. Watermarks rust scapula wing, patina torso.
Through focussed extended perceptual awareness into a liminal unknown comes recognition, and with recognition comes reenergized (coming back to) life, against all odds. Even in the midst of chaos, brokenness, confusion and pain, in the midst of active making and active receptivity, forward momentum is experienced. “Forget your perfect offering”, I am reminded by Lynn and immediately, recall Leonard Cohen’s gravelly voice, “there is a crack in everything [:] that’s how the light gets in.” She tells me I am living my dissertation. The counter intuitive value of imperfection, the unexpected, accidental, crisis and cracks all release meaning making, being each “generative emergent action/sites of learning, illumination, recognition” (Fels Complexity 76).

No matter what generates it, forward momentum happens in a flash, making sense of a whole. For the artist the experience of seeing is in reality a species of understanding. “We say in such cases not only that we recognise x(as y), but we realize x is y. …Understanding is always the experience of a gestalt– the dawning of an aspect that is simultaneously a perception or reperception of a whole” (Wittgenstein as quoted by Zwicky L2). Wittgenstein’s concept of a perspicuous representation “produces just that
understanding which consists in ‘seeing connections’. Hence the importance of finding and inventing intermediate cases (Wittgenstein Investigations para. 122, 42). Making connections is the heart of understanding, and understanding is a suitably complex, open-ended, family resemblance term fitting for art (Richmond Understanding 1-14).

"Perceiving, realizing, apprehending, intuiting, and seeing: these are all terms, among others, that are used in different circumstances to connote understanding" (4). Understanding can grow slowly over years even, but when it arrives it happens in a flash and generates the feeling of momentum. We are transported, vicariously and powerfully, into understanding.

“Understanding involves an experiential and imaginative synthesis of a work's concepts and features, inexpressible aspects and the viewer's subjective contribution” (1). Engaging in this complexity and surfacing with insightful crystallization is one of the chief values of art-making; a practice of the studio that for Graham Sullivan qualifies art practice as a legitimate form of research. What is discovered from within the silence, from within the liminal oceanic interval and in the midst of making, is not some sort of objectivity but is rather a far humbler goal. What is discovered is a small gesture, an honest raw connection between inner and outer worlds. What arises is a new awareness, a formal impulse as Schiller named it, insight or synthesis between one’s internal territory and one’s external situatedness within a context/culture. Artists dwell within a culture and context, and through diving through the liminal gap they surface capable of re-inscribing it. As the artist sifts through sign systems as well as multiple languages of textual and material meaning, something surfaces and is enacted from the watery interstices between inner and outer worlds. In short, new understandings, new insight begins.

In the studio interstitial, intertextual connections are celebrated; understanding is fuelled by changes of aspect and grows in interconnected web-like fecundity rather than being honed to one sharp point of truth. Reception by an audience or a viewer completes the

78 Intermediate cases can also be understood or translated as connecting links.

79 In conversation Stuart Richmond refers to Mason's Understanding Understanding, who makes a distinction between knowledge and understanding. Mason’s book remedies the lack of philosophical attention that understanding has had. Richmond describes understanding as a rich commodious concept inclusive of feeling, imagination, concepts, form, aesthetic judgment, expression and seeing as sense making, while also being fluid, tentative, open-ended and ongoing. It is a term whose basis is making connections and grasping the pattern, fitting to art's indeterminacy.
piece, also an active process, understanding generating a parallel forward momentum for the viewer. But how does the aspect change? How does one wake up?

Awakening to…

Blinking awake, I roll out of bed and begin my new morning routine. What was it that I am to do? Wiping sleep from my eyes I unfold crisp sheets of paper, smoothing them flat in the early morning light. Twenty repetitions…ok, lying down on my yoga matt, I obediently contract seldom-used muscles. One one-thousand, two one-thousand…three one-thousand…keeping long atrophied muscles taut is proving harder than I thought. Awkward and unfamiliar, perception is exerted, poses are found, interoceptively understood, miniscule muscle groups isolated…nine one-thousand, ten one-thousand, eleven one-thousand…stirring proprioceptive energy to life, shaky muscles reveal their weakness…fifteen one-thousand, sixteen one-thousand, seventeen one-thousand…hmm, I feel unfamiliarity in these muscles dissolve, shaky start transforms over the weeks and months strengthened by repetition, encouraged by kind words from my coach. Slowly, overused muscles relax, tense knots release, their load shared by newly stretched and strengthened sinewy strands. Muscles damaged by long overuse are sore, micro-tears stab with the slightest overreach. Courage and determination are gathered. Heartened and curious, I trust the body’s amazing capacity to regenerate, heal. I remember the image from my cardio recovery class - tiny capillaries grow, expand with every step on the elliptical machine, create new routes to oxygenate flesh damaged in my lower right ventricle. “Is the spot dead?” I ask my cardiologist. “Well perhaps, but stunned or frozen may be more accurate. Do you feel that?” he asks, finger probing between 2 ribs. “Yah, I do”, I too feel an odd lumpy knot under my skin, “What is it?” “That’s your scar.” I recall the feeling of falling, then being surrounded by people, out of nowhere. Team Erica, I called them, woke me up from sleepwalking.

The impulse to live with one’s eyes wide open is, for esteemed philosopher educator Maxine Greene, a key to practicing art-making, researching and educating, leading to envisioning possibilities, taking responsibility and experiencing forward momentum. But most significantly in concert with the arts, the imagination is a vehicle by which one can discover and trust one’s own voice. Greene quotes from Alice Walker’s The Color Purple, as abused Celie yearns to make sense of her life, observing, “[Y]et by finding her imagination, she has found a way out of oppression. She is beginning to look through her own eyes, name (in her own voice) her lived world” (Releasing 25). Central not only to aesthetic education but also to all education, Greene identifies the imagination as making living in awareness and “wide awakeness” possible. “The role of the imagination
is not to resolve, not to point the way, not to improve. It is to awaken, to disclose the ordinarily unseen, unheard, and unexpected” (28). Out of an active attentiveness that is situated within the messiness of the intersubjective world, Maxine Greene identifies “wide-awakeness” as resulting from (and here she quotes Alfred Schutz) “a plane of consciousness of highest tension originating in an attitude full of attention to life and its requirements.” She continues, “This attitude, this interest in things, is the direct opposite of the attitude of bland conventionality and indifference so characteristic of our time” (Wide-Awakeness 42). Imagination for Greene and Dewey breaks through the inertia of habit more than any other capacity. Imagination envisions beyond fixed observable ordinary understanding, allowing one to see a reality that is yet to be. Imagination makes possible expectant receptivity, envisions beyond the known, as both Shadbolt and Dewey understand it, into the unknown. Imagination breaks and opens experience to another view, interrupts momentums of habit that prevent perception, and is the precursor to experiencing a waking up. Without the capacity for imagining another way of life, Greene suggests, nothing new can shift or happen. This holds for personal, visual or social imagining; imagination creates the capacity to invent, envisioning other ways, other outcomes, and better futures. Only when we can envision another state of affairs can things happen or change. Greene sees imaginative capacities to be at the root of moral choosing and aesthetics, another reason why aesthetics and ethics might be one.

For Greene, being wide-awake entails a unity between her intellectual and lived experience. “I could not objectify or separate my subjectivity from what I was perceiving. I could not separate my feeling, imagining, wondering, consciousness from the cognitive work I was assigned to do. Nor could I bracket out my biography or experiences of embeddedness in an untidy, intersubjective world” (Greene and Lincoln Center Institute 240). Similarly, educator Karen Meyer locates Living Inquiry in lived experience. Inner work, she maintains, is vitally necessary for all educators, doubly so for the artist/researcher/teacher in order to attend to “the conditioning forces,” as Hannah Arendt calls them, that are often taken for granted, making visible the normally unseen. “Awareness as clearing brings before prejudiced eyes—those ready-made interpretations that otherwise happen behind our backs” (Meyer n. pag.). Living Inquiry explicitly seeks to create a pedagogical space, inviting students to open their eyes, being ever more present, mindfully attentive to what is. Reading this work, I am struck by the similarity of these goals and the goals in my drawing classes. For Richmond, “An
education in art becomes an education in seeing, in freeing the mind from prejudice and
in an opening up of the self to a more sensitive and appreciative connection with art and
the world around” (Richmond *Understanding* 11-12). Care refers to the sense-making
attunement of self in the world and our capacity for authenticity that is also at the heart of
Living Inquiry. Resisting the “tranquilizing pull” of convention, welcoming a practice of
wide-awake awareness and inquiry into everyday contexts:

Awareness as a clearing is an opening at that deeper level…whereby the
world as it is (not as readymade interpretations) emerges into presence.
Awareness allows me to see at a glimpse, this level of disclosure. It is not
that we produce a clearing…. Because I show up mindfully, so to speak,
with care of my self in-the-world, the world shows up as it is, meaningful
and intelligible to me…Awareness throws us into an open lit space, albeit
temporarily. (Meyer n. pag.)

Living Inquiry invites “inner work” so that, as Meyer says, one emerges with a clear mind,
wide-awake and ready to witness the clearings when they happen and trying to hold this
momentary breach open for a little while longer.

Wide-awakeness is enacted in embodied material matter, sound waves, installation site,
educational spaces, and in one’s life. Scrutinizing interior (practicing self-emptying and
active receptivity) and exterior (trusting materials and one’s situatedness within time and
context) is a matter of long attention. One must resist the temptation to jump prematurely
into categories and “knowing.” Defaulting to the intellect alone is easy to do, but as
important as honing the intellect is, it is not on its own sufficient for rationality, much less
producing meaningful visual work. Art is a form of understanding precisely in its embrace
of “not knowing” and bringing “our whole bodily selves to a work of art” (Richmond
*Understanding* 7). It is from extending this liminal perceptual gap and trusting embodied
sensory perception that wide awareness can occur. As awkward and uncomfortable as
this place feels, staying with silence, extending perceptual awareness, and practicing
active receptivity gets easier with time. Whether one calls it loneliness, silence, or
unknowing, the gap or the stop, there is something here worth waiting for.

**Her Own Voice**

Art-making requires nothing less than reason; fluency with theoretical, critical and
creative concepts; countless hours of skill mastery; a command of formal and
imaginative concepts; familiarity with interior, divergent and linear thinking skills; creative synergy of intellect and mindful focus; proficiency with technical, perceptual and conceptual processes; embodied sensory perceptual subjective and social self-awareness; wakeful and alert responsiveness; and most importantly, courage to face the blank wall or studio space. Knowing one’s own visual voice requires reflection: Xingjian’s loneliness, silence, stillness, self-emptying attentive listening, and importantly—actively working.

Hi Rebecca

Just to follow up with our conversation re dry-spells, a regular pause, a Sabbath rest helps prevent dry-spells, but once you are in one, then working your way out is the only way. Dry spells also mean that your work and you are changing and therefore, you are no longer satisfied with your previous stage. It usually means a new plateau is about to happen, a big jump forward, change at the very least: learning is immanent. So be encouraged! My recommendation, which you are free to make your own mind up about, is that now is the time to pull for all you are worth! You are on the cusp of something! Be curious as to how your work wants to change. Listen, but most importantly, work.

I am pulling for you!

Erica

Subjectivity, self-emptying and silence are indispensable parts of both cognition and creativity. Neither starting something new nor recognising one’s own voice would be possible without them.

In Silence

Be still>
Listen to the stones of the wall.
Be silent, they try
To speak your

Name.
Listen
To the living walls.
Who are you?
Who
Are you? Whose
Silence are you?

80 E-mail conversation with a senior student Feb 24th 2012.
Who (be quiet)
Are you (as these stones
Are quiet). Do not
Think of what you are,
Still less of
What you may one day be.
Rather
Be what you are (but who?) be
The unthinkable one
You do not know.

O be still, while
You are still alive,
And all things live around you
Speaking (I do not hear)
To your own being,
Speaking by the Unknown
That is in you and in themselves.

“I will try, like them
To be my own silence:
And this is difficult. The whole
World is secretly on fire. The stones
Burn, even the stones
They burn me. How can a man be still or
Listen to all things burning? How can he dare
To sit with them when
All their silence
Is on fire?”

(Merton 280-1)

Seeing the world on fire; recognising your own voice. It is no one else’s responsibility but yours. “You were made and set here to give voice to your own astonishment,” says Dillard who then quotes the sculptor Anne Truitt, “The most demanding part of living a lifetime as an artist is the strict discipline of forcing oneself to work steadfastly along the nerve of one’s own most intimate sensitivity” (Writing 68). Dillard continues,

Write as if you were dying. At the same time, assume you write for an audience consisting solely of terminal patients. That is, after all, the case. What would you begin writing if you knew you would die soon? What would you say to a dying person that would not enrage by its triviality? (68).

After returning from sick leave, I asked my upper level drawing students “If you knew you were to die soon, what would you make this semester?” The projects were very fine.
Perception can be honed, and art-making practices can be profitably initiated into, but when developing your own visual voice, creating your own visual expression, trust who and where you are. Spend everything you’ve got: pay attention as if you were dying because this is the case for you and everyone else. We are, each of us, dying, but we were born to begin, as Arendt insightfully observes. And so begin, again and again and again, each new day. Love your work, your materials, and care deeply, about your field, each day; respect the work of your peers, throw yourself into your art-making and don’t waste a minute because as Kant rightly points out in the *Critique of Judgement*, there are no rules to guide you. There is much to learn but there are no rules. Rules are the discoveries of others, routes others have found into the unknown, and although we learn from one another’s discoveries just as in any other field, and rules give courage and widen one’s horizons, they cannot just be followed as a rote formula. Making something where there was “nothing” before can be terrifying, but also exhilarating. *Nothing*, however, is a less terrifying when understood as “filled with potentiality,” to borrow the generative Buddhist concept. To be held lightly, “rules” can in fact block potentiality, and are therefore only to be understood as guidelines (Richmond in Richmond and Snowber *Landscapes* 110). Mountains of guidance, suggestions, examples, formulae, theories, and discourses exist—and there is much that is mandatory to learn, but in the end something must be made through the artist’s own subjective embodied self that expresses, that is an analogous form for something s/he is only incoately aware of. Kant called the ability to give the rule to art genius; most artists call it terror, gap, lacuna, and “the only game in town.” Interstitial extended interior listening, long looking, is what is required; acknowledging uncertainty and risk; humbly attending to this interior place out of which something will be born, something that, as of yet, has no shape or name or form. *Suspend, extend the unknowing*. Trust the “paradoxical vexed space between “knowing” and “not knowing”.*

Seek resonance with some unnameable yearning sense; embody, make manifest; trust intuition, knowing at the same time that there are no innocent marks. Every mark, form and way of working sparks discourse and precedent—carries with it history and theory, carries meaning encoded with every choice that complicates and clears ones expression. “Freefall into

---

81 In conversation with Lynn Fels.
82 Lynn Szabo referring to Thomas Merton in 2007 conference proceedings *A Rage of Love Through a Glass Darkly: Suffering, the Sacred, and the Sublime* Conference, Trinity Western University.
interstices between the real and the not yet real worlds where absence (the not yet known) becomes presence” (Fels, *in the wind* 57).

*Balance on the brink of the precipice called perception, gather into your sails affect, intuition, and discourse, and then, launch into the deep.*

Intentionally cultivating self-emptying, attention, scrutiny and loneliness are unavoidable in order to recognise your own voice. And then you work. Any attempt to untangle the avaricious tentacles of the ego is excruciatingly difficult, as nearly anyone who has tried can understand and attest to. But the effort is worthwhile, and as Weil describes it, decreation itself releases energy for this wordless task. Curiously holding one’s embodied present experience, enduring its potentially endless duration with courage, facing the blank page, failing canvas, empty studio or echoing editing room, it is necessary to silently wait, then to pull for all you are worth. You follow the work where it goes, with no reserve. Art-making is an apprenticeship in being alone, scrutinizing the self, trusting an incarnate subjectivity, being comfortable, unselfconscious in one’s own skin, as they say, while also trusting the material cultural situatedness of which one’s body is a part. Staying put in one’s embodied self and trusting the work rather than fleeing into one’s head and the intellect’s propensity to come prematurely to a solution is mandatory; to work, effortfully extending perceptual awareness rather than imposing is the task. This is not easy in an age of distraction—by the media or otherwise. Electronic devices can accompany you every minute of the day, making internal stillness a rare commodity, the interior realm an awkward and uncharted unknown, and chances of waking up slim. Without interior silence and scrutiny, it is easy to simply never encounter your own voice, or to see clearly your own life. Eventually momentum builds, the tide shifts, takes over and you are being carried. Developing embodied perceptual proprioceptive vision, Appelbaum recommends metaphorically that blinding the eye can “restore knowledge to her throne through proprioceptive vision” (Appelbaum 72). Perhaps one might recommend unplugging the earphones as well. Reawakening an effortful embodied perception, throwing everything you have into your work, engaging in decreation, self-emptying listening through both interior and exterior scrutiny are the means to engage the tripartite liminal process, wake from giving over one’s voice, and reclaim one’s voice with one single clear call…I am here.
Offering

Things I learned: so much of it sounds stereotypical—never take one day, one moment, for granted—live in the present, not the future and never the past. Never take one encounter, one person for granted. Attention can heal. Every eye focused on is a gift. I learned of the importance of simple kindness and of trusting what is—the material conditions around me, of the indescribable beauty of sunlight steaming through the window and watching slanting light move over wall, ceiling, floor … I learned to love the simplest of gestures and tasks; there is no such thing as the mundane. That fear and shame shut down flow and do not support a life of listening. What is there to fear? Slow down, do not do anything in a hurry, savour every mouthful, every moment, but do not waste a moment. I learned the merits of honesty and of not pretending. I always knew the merits of hard work, but I learned that our material selves cannot be separated from the spiritual or intellectual sides of ourselves—we are one package— and that we ignore our embodied existence at our peril. Our bodies are the primary way through which we know anything. We ignore this knowing, this embodied attentiveness, as I said, at our peril. There is nothing wrong with head knowledge. Honing cognitive capacities is vital work essential to the task of living and making art, but the problem is that when sensations are severed below the neck, then long atrophied perceptual, experiential knowing needs to be woken up, reclaimed and rekindled into wide awareness. Waking up, we can pay attention with renewed vision, active receptivity, speaking, laughing, enacting some unnameable thing into existence. We find we are surrounded at every moment by unspeakable beauty, unbearable suffering, and unfathomable joy. The least we can do is pay attention.

What I have to offer for those who teach and for those who make art, what I have come to recognise from this pedagogical journey, is that art is a form of understanding born out of mindful attention; art is an apophatic epistemological small humble gesture that invites the embodied flinging of one’s whole self into the task. I have come to conceptualize the Aesthetics of Attentiveness: the importance of the stop, the necessity of paying attention, the fecundity of self-emptying, the risk of liminal flow, and the surprise of surfacing into wide-awakeness. I have come to articulate three practices of creative liminality: a recognition that to come to the act of making requires three stages of embodied engagement, the rituals of self-emptying; the liminal space of creation; the reflective act of seeing again what we have come to understand through creating. This process of searching, this philosophical performative inquiry, brought me past my own ceiling, stretched me to new understandings, shaped my art, my research, my pedagogy and my life. We are indeed alive in our own skins; attending to what matters—to the heart pulsing, the narratives coursing through our veins, our longing as yet-unknown released through
art-making, calls us to wide-awareness; pencil, brush, camera, ready at hand at the water’s edge, willing to leap.

**At the ocean.** At first I just stood at the water’s edge. Opening the bin I brought with me, I unpacked the sheepskins that I had been working on for the past two summers. Unfolding them gently, I carefully laid them on the sand and walked into the gentle tidal suck and pull; smelled the briny benediction. I sat down in the sand near the water’s edge, soaked in the rhythm of the waves and drank in the most beautiful sunset I think I have ever witnessed as it slowed and gently changed colours, heightened in intensity until the sky was electric, neon orange and then red. It was breath taking. I released pain and tension into the earth, gradually relaxed, and washed the skins in the salty swells. I bent forward into the water and started swimming.

Waves recurrent rhythm,
    holding me, slowing heart and breath.
Grey green briny benediction,
    reminds me to whom I be(long).
Works Cited


*Ready to Leap*, work in progress in the studio. 5’ x 10’, graphite on baltic birch