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Writing the Body/Resistance/Endurance: An A/r/tographic Ritual Inquiry

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Performance Ritual. UBC Endowment Lands. August 2, 2003.
Photography by Cathy Pulkinghorn

Resistance and endurance are the words that surface when I begin to share the process of art making, reflecting, and writing. Can I write a language of the body without the guilt of betrayal? I have made a commitment to integrate language and writing into my art; to do this I must continually release the power of silence. I resist what Barthes as cited in Rose (2001) called anchorage, text that accompanies an image and “allows the reader to choose between what could be a confusing number of possible denotative meanings” (81). As a weak form of anchorage, words must be hunted down in my art and are often a late discovery in the viewing. Trinh Minh-ha (1999) reframes the struggle that I find my body moving through as I write in what she calls,

...women’s womb writing, which neither separates the body from the mind nor sets the latter against the heart...but allows each part of the body to become



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As I look at the photo images of my private performance ritual and the video documentation I ask what did I incarnate, enact, reorder, reinterpret, and challenge? In the experience of the performance ritual I trusted my desire to enact the event, but I was not aware of a significant purpose beyond undertaking the task I had set out for myself of writing on my entire body. In the poetic rendering, *Third Body Testimony*, written shortly afterwards, I was able to describe the experience yet still felt a gap as to the full significance of the act. It is through the reading of theorists that I move beyond my own artistic impulse and begin to articulate and further re-value the importance of giving ritual space to the body.

Feminist philosopher Carol Bigwood (1998) writes that: “Though the body is primarily nonrational^[4] and nonlinguistic in its communications, it nevertheless is full of a significance and has a way of ordering of its own (106).” The ordering of my a/r/tographic inquiry called for a natural nurturing and supportive environment to begin my work within. In this space I became a “living body.” In her concept of renaturalizing the body Bigwood draws upon Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the body:

The body that is sensitive and in deep communion with its environment is not the biological object-body that science describes but is the “living body” or the “phenomenological body”.... [that] is not fixed but continually emerges anew out of an ever changing weave of relations to earth and sky, things, tasks, and other bodies (105).

My visual art practice and performance ritual processes utilize the elements of collage. In approaching writing as an art form I echo the structure of collage in this article. I weave together the voices of theorist, writers, and artists whose words have brought illumination

and sense to my feminist art process and practice, their words are woven with my own writing[5], art images, poetic renderings, and trances. Through their ideas and theories I have come to find that my art is not completely embedded in the numinous, the mysterious, and that it flows with a sense of direction that can be articulated within a phenomenological, feminist, and educative discourse. The ongoing work of integration is possible because of and with the struggle of resistance and determination to endure the unknown.

This article and my academic and arts-based research is situated within a/r/tography, an alternative and evolving form of inquiry that calls for an inner collaborative relationship between the art/researcher/teacher self. Educator, researcher, and artist Rita Irwin (2004) explains a/r/tography as the act of the “artist/researcher/teacher art making and writing offer[ing] complementary yet resistant forms of recursive inquiry.” She goes on to describe “A/r/tography [a]s a fluid orientation creating its rigour through continuous reflexivity, discourse analysis, and hermeneutic inquiry” (8).

The a/r/tographic project that forms the basis of this article is not completed, resolved, or pulled together. It is not in possession of itself but it is in motion, learning. I write from the third space[6] that Stephanie Springgay (2003) alludes to with Merleau-Ponty’s written image, “my body inserts itself between the two leaves of the world, which itself is inserted between the leaves of my body (1968, 264)” (8). This article allows others to witness the formation of a performance ritual and art installation. The elements of the inquiry are not presented or cast together as fixed or linear. They are in an emergent state that includes large gaps in rational understanding. I am taking the risk of inviting others into the felt experience of what I feel is still a raw process[7] of inquiry. I do this remembering that the work is held within the third space of ritual. I invite the reader/viewer into a ritual third space—into trance[8].

I find myself walking down the path – down to the ocean – watching – looking at the trees – the greenery – glad to be down here in this space – walking out and seeing the ocean and today I think I am going to walk along the path – it’s along the side of the ocean – I’m seeing a tree with a big hole in it – a large tree and I’m walking into that – I can slide my way down – there’s an opening to pass by and I burrow through the opening – I can slide down this opening – I end up down at this flat plateau area inside – there seems to be another person there – I think it’s a woman and she’s dressed in aboriginal regalia – dance ritual regalia – made with natural things like large leaves – ya very earthy – she’s looking at me and she’s black – she’s got some rattles – she’s probably wondering where I’ve come from – what I’m doing down here – I don’t know – anyway she starts dancing around me – she’s starting to move around me in a circle – rattling her rattles and kind of pounding her feet – a marching dance – ya with her feet making contact with the earth – and I’m standing in the middle letting the beat of her feet and the rattles move around my whole body – taking them in – it’s very earthy down here – natural earth colours – she’s starting to spin as she moves around me and her outfit flares out as she spins – she keeps twirling around me in a circular motion as she is spinning herself and she can do it very fast – she’s adept at this move – keeps her balance – she’s starting to wear through the earth where she is circling and spinning around – the earth is beginning to wear as she digs down into it with the pressure of her body and her movement – burrowing in through the earth and then the earth starts to slide down – she’s let loose this platform that falls down like a very primitive elevator shoot – there is still ground under me – I’m still standing as it goes down and she is not coming down with me – I’m going down on my own – I think I’m going to lie down so when I hit I’m not thrown off – whatever the bottom is – I’ve come to a still place – I sit up – I’m reaching for my “double”[9] – but she is not there yet so I’m going to bring her in –

(deep breath out) – she comes out sitting across from me with our hands joined – and she embraces me – gives me a hug – we’re kind of sitting in a position with our genitals showing with our feet flat, knees bent, legs open – aha – and we’re bleeding – there’s blood flowing from our vulvas to the earth – this deep part of the earth that we’re in now – ahhh – it’s that thick red blood – very thick – it’s nice to be bleeding with someone at the same time – so we seem to be in a cave of sorts – and start dipping our fingers into the blood that has flowed out of our bodies – and writing on the ground – write on the ground my double does – I want to get up and dipping my fingers into that warm moist blood – I want to write on the walls – and she moves around as she writes on the ground and I move as I write – I move with my body as I write – coming into the center to dip into the blood – I can also dip back into my vulva as well to access the blood and I don’t know what we’re writing but we’re covering the walls and the floor of this cave – we’re both very committed to that – determined – moving around the space and then we meet up together – my “double” has moved into me – come up to my side and she starts moving her hand with mine and we write in unison and she follows along with what I write – writing it with double hands – the script can get bigger now writing it with double hands and our bodies are moving fully with the script and moving around the cave – around the walls – across the floor – it’s a bit of a script dance that we do – we look at each other and we are both smiling – we have our hands together – our red hands – red from the blood – and then we dip from our vulvas more red blood and as we face each other we write on each other’s bodies – moving around each other – touching each other with our fingers – writing – now we have our backs together and our arms are out and we join hands – we start to spin in this cave that has our script written all around it – on the floor – on the walls – on the ceiling – as we spin – our heads together as we spin – watching all the red words blur – and at the same time on the floor as we spin we start to erase the words on the floor – mix them together – and as we spin our hands touch the walls and they also start to blend and blur together – it’s all very tactile touching of this cave – touching of our bodies – ahhh – it’s full – it’s full of writing – our lips to the ground and our lips to the wall and we start to inhale all these words created from this blood – great atmosphere to inhale – breathe in – ahhh this rich earth smell that we’re inhaling – oh ya – and then we sit back down – back to back – touching backs – having just nourished ourselves – I think I’m ready to bring her back in – I thank her for the experience together down here – sharing blood – sharing words – sharing dance – I breath her back in (inhale deeply) and I’m on my own and the floor begins to rise – carrying me back up – back up to where the aboriginal black woman waits for me – she gives me her hand – pulls me up – and I thank her and I hug her –and she leads me to the entry way and I let myself be pulled back up to the upper world – to the tree and back out into the sunlight and the path in the forest – I walk along the path looking out at the ocean – the sun like glittering jewels and I head back up the path on the hill – a different environment out here – crisp not moist like below – I reach the top and bring myself back here to the room.

—November 22, 2003.

Writing the body, then, is both constative and performative. It signifies those bodily territories that have been kept under seal; it figures the body. But, writing the body is also a performative utterance; the feminine libidinal economy inscribes itself in language (Dallery, 1992, 59).

(Re-)discovering herself, for a woman, thus could only signify the possibility of

sacrificing no one of her pleasures to another, of identifying herself with none of them in particular, of never being simply one. A sort of expanding universe to which no limits could be fixed and which would not be incoherence nonetheless.... Woman always remains several, but she is kept from dispersion because the other is already within her and is autoerotically familiar to her (Irigaray, 1997, 254).

The trance is a “performative utterance” that “inscribe[s]... into language” (Dallery, 1992, 59) that a woman is “never ...simply one” whose “expanding universe... [has] no limits” (Irigaray, 1997, 254). This trance experience, I believe incorporates and documents the multiple aspects of the body/mind/spirit of a woman returning to her body to reclaim a text that is embodied and authentic to her spirit.

Trance is a performative ritual act that takes place within an altered state of consciousness. I experience it as an active form of meditation that is not focused on the concept of emptying the mind, which predominates in most traditional Eastern meditation (Suzuki, 1975). The active mediation/performance of trance is a place of expanding the mind’s imaginary. Within the third space of trance the mind can imagine and hence practice performing the body outside of limiting conditioned “regulatory norms” (Butler, 234) that our learned minds and culture repeatedly perform.

The artist part of me has great resistance writing about the art while the art is newly emerging; between the worlds and I am very reluctant to be pulled into consciousness. From this location of resistance, ambiguity, and disagreement I continue to struggle to write knowing that “[t]he hegemony of patriarchy is embedded in language”(Dallery, 62).

My body rebels
legs bounce
below the computer desk
shoulders burn
facing the computer screen

My being screams
soundless
as I write
offering voice, giving birth
to new language

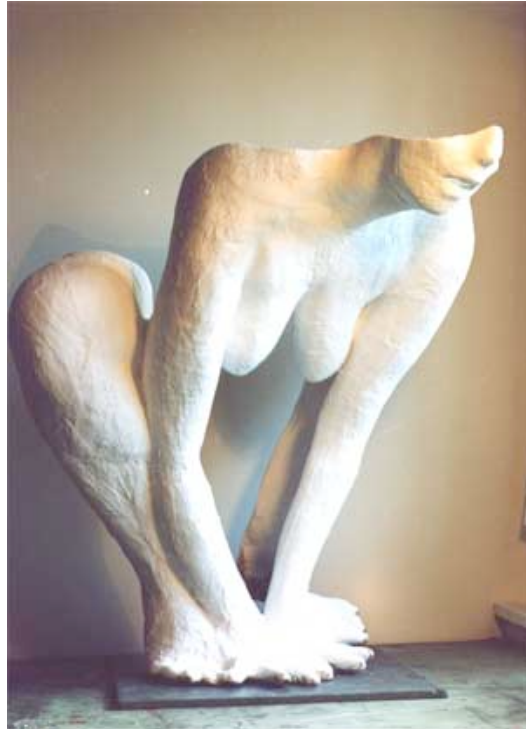
How does one integrate body and word after more than 500 years of separation? [\[10\]](#) I live the split with my love/hate relationship of ambiguity with words. I love the mark-making aesthetic of script and the wisdom and knowledge that is shared through the written and spoken word. I hate when words and language are used to control and manipulate, when the power that they can hold is not acknowledged. I have kept my sense of power often through silence and a refusal to give importance to words. It is in the shadow of this dichotomy that words find their way into my art. When words are in an art piece they are my own, I resist making them clearly visible for the viewer, often leaving traces of text to be pondered.

In moving forward with my a/r/tographic work, the month following the performance ritual I entered another trance state facilitated by a friend who works with a trance process developed by Anthropologist Felicitas Goodman [\[11\]](#) (1990). This process involves creating sacred space using indigenous ritual, sitting in a specific posture (I chose to work with the “diviner’s” posture) and listening to the shaking of a rattle for a timed period to assist the trance process. I enter the trance.

I find myself in a cave where I am able to move and dance through and within the rock that encloses the cave. The colour that is within the rock is an amazing metallic turquoise blue. The felt experience of moving through the density of the rock effortlessly is ecstatic. I push my hands out and they break through the stone surface into the cave, my body follows and emerges out of the rock. I immediately dive into the deep pool of water that is in the center of the cave. Once immersed in the water my human body transforms into a frog, and in this form I continue my descent to the bottom of the pool where I find ancient stones that I carry, one by one, back to the surface of the pool. I sense that these stones hold ancient knowledge and I want to bring them to the surface to be studied.

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Impacted by this transformational trance experience I began to investigate embodied frog energy. Looking at the forest photos in retrospect I recognize myself embodying frog-like postures in the original performance ritual (see image 5). In response to the photos and the trance I chose to re-enact a frog position in my studio where I had a friend cast my body with plaster bandages in the kundalini yoga asana of the frog. Unlike the freeing experience of the performance ritual, the trances, and the invigorating motion that accompanies the yoga asana, the casting process became a test of my body's ability to endure confinement and stillness. My limbs lost significant blood circulation and became body parts that I felt no physical connection with. To keep the integrity of the cast I had to endure a loss of feeling in my limbs and remain in a state of discomfort in my body much longer than I physically wanted to. The removal of the cast and the reactivation of my blood circulation was a painfully welcome experience.



Front view. In process. Cast plaster bandages, 26.5h x 27w x 22d inches. 2003.



Back view. In process. Cast plaster bandages, 26.5h x 27w x 22d inches. 2003.

Continuing my a/r/tographic inquiry, in the next cast created in my studio I embodied the experience of the bird wings that had propelled my body at the end of my performance ritual in the forest, described in the following poetic lines.

My hands arms catch the wind
Bird wings singing



In process. Cast plaster bandages, 9h x 65.5w x 16d inches. 2003.



In process. Cast plaster bandages, 9h x 65.5w x 16d inches. 2003.

Although this process was not as physically arduous as the casting of the frog position, I went through the same experience of confinement, loss of awareness in my limbs, and discomfort. Through the physical creating of these sculptural “objects” my body went through the metaphoric loss of control (subjectivity) that many theorists write of as the objectification of the female body within patriarchy. Blood circulation, the body’s life source is metaphorically blocked in the objectification of women’s bodies.

In writing and re-telling these experiences I have become aware of the parallels to Iris Young’s (1998) writing where she brings forward,

Beauvoir’s account of woman’s existence in patriarchal society as defined by a basic tension between immanence and transcendence.... The female person (261)...live[s] a contradiction: as human she is a free subject who participates in transcendence, but her situation as a woman denies her that subjectivity and transcendence (262).... To the extent that a woman lives her body as a thing, she remains rooted in immanence, is inhibited, and retains a distance from her body as transcending movement and from engagement in the world’s possibilities. (267)

As a female in this society, I live the tension between the polarization of immanence and transcendence daily. The tensions and the struggles are embedded in my body and the bodies of those around me. Susan Bordo (1997) reminds us that,

Our conscious politics, social commitments, strivings for change may be undermined and betrayed by the life of our bodies—not the craving, instinctual body imagined by Plato, Augustine, and Freud, but what Foucault calls the “docile body,” regulated by the norms of cultural life. (91)

Two artists, whose work I have been drawn to, who work with the body and address the tensions created by the regulated body in our society, are Shirin Neshat, a Middle Eastern woman living in North America and Cindy Sherman, an American woman. I turn to these artists’ work to assist the understanding of the emerging theory within my own a/r/tographic process. Freda Drees (1998) in writing about Sherman’s art observes that,

The unifying factor in her work is ...the body. The unity of her work resides in the centralization of the body. The body is the most real, and at the same time provides an image of transcendence. The living body takes on traits of God, although it is not deified or idolized. It is neither worshipped nor revered. (132)

Neshat utilizes the text of feminist poets and Sufi mystics as a veil over the skin of the women in her art images. For Western audiences, who are the majority of viewers as her work is not exhibited in the Middle East, the text that is written on the exposed body parts of these seemingly silent women is unreadable and a mystery. Lehmann (2001) shares that the artist felt the images were “naked” (378) without a script. The addition of the script is an aesthetic decision that I believe adds a transcendent (subjective) component to the body that is energized with the challenging and spirited words. My own written upon body became an additional layer of skin covering my nakedness while simultaneously exposing my internal thoughts and struggles.

I am appreciative of the artists who have forged this ground ahead of me and feel fortunate as a practicing visual and performance ritual artist to be familiar with dwelling in the unknown territory of the creative process. The a/r/tographic inquiry requires a willingness to follow the process and “not [be] in possession of itself,” and as such holds fertile ground and possibilities for new ways of learning and knowledge making in this world.

My passion as a feminist artist creating re-presentations of the body has been to make “visual art [that] expresses the altered world of a trance/dream state and reflects a female vision within non-confining time and space” (Bickel, artist statement, 2001). My art walks the fine line of reminding and emboldening women. “To open her body in free, active, open extension and bold outward-directedness” and in so doing runs the risk “for a woman to invite objectification.... The threat of being seen is, however, not the only threat of objectification that the woman lives. She also lives the threat of invasion of her body space” (Young, 1998, 271).

Reclaiming and transforming the space that our bodies, voices, images, and writing occupies is the dangerous ground that my art continually leads me to. Without ignoring this danger in my art making process, I continue to enter and draw upon the territory of the third space of ritual, which offers a sacred space for the full honouring of our bodies and voices without censor. To have a place where full breath and movement is practiced can lead us closer to the place of holding a healthy ground in what is “normally” a disempowering and invaded location within our society.

As an a/r/tographer I am challenged to address ethical, educational, and theoretical questions and problems. This requires a constant willingness to enter areas of discomfort, resistance, ambiguity, and disagreement without limiting or shutting down the creative, researching, and learning experience. Combining ritual within a/r/tography has allowed me to endure what may be experienced as disturbing unknown places. Within the third space of art and ritual I am able to remain with and endure the struggle and resistance that caused me to ask “Can I write a language of the body without the guilt of betrayal?” Ritual offers sacred space to fully embody an inquiry and thus leads one to uncover arational ways of knowing that can further weave and mend the gaps instilled between the mind and body in our society.

Endnotes

[1] A/r/tography as a method incorporates art and graphy in the inquiry, and requires a

contiguous relationship between the artist, research and teacher self.

[2] I operate with a distinction between private and public performance ritual. In a private performance ritual I invite witnesses/participants that I feel can hold and support the space to do personal ritual work. The ritual is often very loosely planned and my intention is to be open to the unknown and learn. In contrast public performance ritual is open to the public. More preparation is taken in the planning and I am prepared to hold and support the space for whomever comes to the event. My intention is to present an experience and a teaching for the purpose of learning.

[3] Helene Cixous, Adriene Rich, Susan Bordo, Arlene B. Dallery, Celeste Snowber, Luce Irigaray

[4] I prefer to use the word arational, which drawing from Swiss philosopher Jean Gebser and mystical traditions is understood as a form of knowing that includes the body, emotions, the senses, intuition, imagination, creation making, the mystical, spiritual and the relational, along side the rational.

[5] I choose for the most part to not paraphrase or integrate the writing of these artists and theorists within my text but to juxtapose their text with my visual, creative and academic text.

[6] I am drawing here on the term identified by literary scholar Homi Bhabha and further defined by Ted Aoki. (2003, 5). I use it in a psychoanalytic way, trance being the non-polarizing third space for the engagement between the conscious and the unconscious.

[7] The completed Master of Arts thesis, including completed art, can be accessed at www.barbarabickel.com.

[8] Trance is a technique for accessing unconscious/subconscious information and knowledge. It is an experience of dreaming while awake. I was introduced to working with trance states by priestesses in the Reclaiming Tradition. Starhawk (1979), a co-founder of the Reclaiming Tradition, writes: “Trance techniques are found in every culture and religion— from the rhythmic chant of a Siberian Shaman to free association on a Freudian analyst’s couch” (154). While in the trance I spoke out loud and tape-recorded my spoken words. The tape was then transcribed. Punctuation is purposefully left out to capture the lulled singing quality that the voice takes on while in trance.

[9] I use the term “double” to signify an inner ally/teacher/guide that can be accessed through dream or trance. Mindell (1993) and Carlos Castaneda write of the dreaming double that has long been part of shamanic practice (125).

[10] I refer here to the Cartesian/modernist mind/body dualism that has dominated western society for the past 500 years.

[11] Goodman’s work comes from the study of bodily postures and altered states of consciousness. The thirty trance postures that she has uncovered she terms “psychological archeology.”

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