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## Soil: Threshold Spaces of Subjectivity, Pedagogy, and Place in Landscape Art

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*Through intersections of place, art, and pedagogy, normative ways of understanding landscape art and subjectivity are opened to other possibilities. With the creation of eight pieces of art, and the various activities related to them, I offer alternatives to the metaphor of wilderness that informs nationalism. With this a/r/tographical inquiry into elements of the land that serve as structural and heuristic supports, interwoven with the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy and Jacques Derrida, I draw on understandings of subjectivity theorized and performed from the premise that it, like learning, is an unpredictable, relational activity of emergence that exists as a threshold space.*

*In the early spring, the Boreal is brown beneath and above me: the colour of nature's sleep. By burying a piece of cloth, I foresee that I will initiate a drawing, making an*



*arc of soil and dead grass. It will be a brown, gestural line cracking the future uniformity of the lawn. But that is not what happens. It all turns green and weeks later I have to move blades of grass and search carefully to find the thin scar that is the only evidence of my art. The grass covers and erases the art, laughing in silent chorus.*

Through intersections of place, art, and pedagogy, normative ways of understanding landscape art and subjectivity are opened to other possibilities. With the creation of eight pieces of landscape art, and the various activities connected to them, I offer alternatives to the metaphor of wilderness that informs nationalism. The wilderness trope shapes and reproduces a common attitude that frames land primarily as a resource, supporting hegemonic social and economic interests (Mackey, 2002; Mitchell, 1994; Whitelaw, 2007; Wright, 2004). As I rework the mimetic representation of nature as wilderness that is strongly situated in the landscape genre, I question the role of artistic traditions that have enforced and continue to reinforce the power relations of the colonial past and neoliberal present.

Implicit in this attitude toward the land is a formulation of subjectivity as liberal and modern, set within the history of Cartesianism, where individual autonomy and linear progress are valued. With this a/r/tographical inquiry into elements of the land that serve as structural and heuristic supports, I draw on alternative understandings of subjectivity, theorized and performed from the premise that it, like learning, is an unpredictable, relational activity of emergence that exists as a threshold space.

For this study, three participating artists and I placed two 12-foot lengths of white cotton outdoors, for a total of eight pieces of fabric. The participants are midcareer artists whose work concerns the land, and who pedagogically interact with the public in some capacity. Each artist, Pat Beaton, Robert Dmytruk, and Peter von Tiesenhausen, selected two places that held personal significance. Four of the eight pieces of cloth were hidden: Both of von Tiesenhausen's pieces were hidden, one under a rock and one under a bridge; one of mine was hidden underground; one of Beaton's was hidden under compost. Four lengths of cotton were visible: Both of Dmytruk's sections were visible, with one lying on the surface of his garden and one wrapped around the base of a tree; one of Beaton's was partially burned; one of mine was tied to a tree.

I take the participants' and my local, significant places as sites from which to reverse the binary of landscape and artist. Rather than artists marking and representing the land in intended ways, the land marks the project of the artist. This reversal opens possibilities to touch the manner that landscape paintings are embedded in the political ways the land is viewed and used by offering art about the land that alters the normalized vistas in paint, pixel, and celluloid that surround us as much as, or more than, the physical landscapes do in daily life. These pieces of cloth, as landscape art, have potential for surprising the spectator out of assumed notions of landscape art that are connected historically with private land ownership and/or often represented as sublime wilderness (Hjartarson, 2005; Thomas, 1999).

Functioning on one level as a marker for the relationship of artist to place, the lengths of cloth remained in these chosen places for 6 weeks, to be imprinted

and conditioned by the elements conducive to each particular environment. As I worked with the artists at their various sites, discussion about the importance of the placement and subsequent retrieval of the fabric was documented on video. The land marked the cotton with various levels of decay and other processes of change, and the fabric and video interviews became the raw materials for aesthetic inquiry. The landscape pieces that I created from these chosen places are titled *Fungus, Water, Wood, Soil, Snow, Fire, and Wind*. The remainder of this essay highlights one of these pieces of landscape art, entitled *Soil*.



*An urgent wind is howling on the other side of the studio door. It rattles and I consider the muffled sounds of spaces underground. This leaves me to consider the nature of a threshold between very disparate elements: wind and soil. I am at the invisible edge where soil touches the relentless force of wind. I dig in.*

In the global arena of image-based communication, education is central in understanding the power structures and influences inherent in image manipulation and consumption. This has been the aim of many art educators who have called for increased debate surrounding the use and abuse of images through discussions of visual culture (Darts, 2004; Desai, 2005; Duncum, 2002; Freedman, 2003; Stuhr, 2003; Tavin, 2003). Given that the emergence of contemporary subjectivity and collective identity is influenced by a continual exposure to images, both in virtual spaces and in physical places, the ways that landscape images are read in relation to living together in the land warrants careful attention.

*I stuff the folds of clean, white cotton into a narrow crevice, cramming cloth into fractured earth. The lofty distance represented in a landscape painting has been reduced to dirt hollowed away, leaving a touching of fabric and soil. I attempt with this cloth to take the distance of a view and the proximity of a hole in the ground and twist them together. Through a shift from representational landscape painting to cloth, the art is buried in the land and mixed into the vista. It becomes the material threshold between the land and scape: an erasure of the view.*

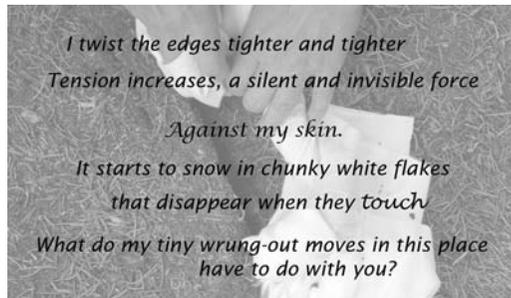
This is most profound in considering space as a necessary component of the subject. In burying fabric, I comment on the nature of space inherent in art about

the land: that the form of traditional representation, replete with foreground, middle ground, and background is inadequate as a way of understanding the nature of the learning subject. I find the artistic, educational, and ontological relevance in the closing of traditional, Euclidean space and the opening of a post-structural understanding of self through ideas of threshold, limit, and shifting borders. Between the binary of the distant and proximal, there is a relation to the ontological becoming of singularities: to my becoming. It is not that my eyes are focused on the distant horizon and so I miss what is underfoot. It is more complicated than either/or. It is the nature of *between* as the site of meaning: the threshold.

A pedagogical threshold is the site of touching, physical or otherwise, of one with another. It is the moment of difference and holds the potential for learning. Many educational scholars support a similar metaphor of a third space when thinking about learning as relational and mutable (Aoki, 2003/2005; Irwin et al., 2006). If the educator *becomes* within this space, where two diverse aspects touch each other, she is the threshold between: dividing and holding together simultaneously, the mobile act of contact between the known and the unknown. This is an opportunity for teachers to rethink their worlds: to reconsider their relationships with their students and with knowledge as singular acts of being/becoming. I work on these pieces of cotton and acknowledge the significance of existential inquiry with respect to forces of social change that begin with an awareness of self, relationships, and values. This is the ethical connection to ontology that is always addressed within the potential for social change—change that requires reflection upon assumptions and values we hold close. As Grosz notes,

Ontology always has both an ethical and a political dimension. It's not as if we have ontology and ethics, ontology and politics. Ontology is about what there is and what debts we owe to it. It always entails an ethics, a debt, obligation, responsibility. (cited in Ausch, Doane, & Perez, n.d.)

As a distant, yet sonorous, echo of Heideggerian thought, Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) shifts the significance of meaning from *being* to the relation *between* one person and another, so that his notion of being-with is evidenced through his notion of sense. Sense, as a singularity, that is, indivisible and immediate, circulates in the world as the physicality of the world and also as meaning in the world in its random, continual flux (Nancy, 1997). Sense



moves through exposures of being, neither coming from inside nor from outside the self. Instead, it moves *between*, giving relation meaning in the acknowledgment of difference but without reducing encounters to one interpretation (Hutchens, 2005; James, 2006; Nancy, 2000; Ross, 2008). The significance of sense for Nancy rests in this co-being, where existential meaning is created in each contact. Nancy (2000) notes, “Being cannot *be* anything but being-with-one-another, circulating in the *with* and as the *with* of this singularly plural coexistence . . . [T]here is no other meaning than the meaning of circulation” (p. 3, italics in original).

In touching and manipulating the cloth with my hands in close proximity—and with my eyes, erasing distance—not only the illusion of distance found in painting, but physical distance, seems to disappear. If I follow Nancy’s trajectory concerning the ways that we touch with our eyes, this phrase suggests a paradox in that it is impossible to do so—to touch across distance (cited in Derrida, 2005). This oddity in the language draws attention to the ways that my body *is*, in relation to sight and touch. It is part of an unexpected flow of proximity within distance as I touch with my eyes, staring at a distant horizon, or staring into another’s eyes. I seek to understand the existential connection between the act of looking at another and touching her eyes, and the act of looking at art. I further complicate this theoretical trail by considering that I took this cloth out of sight by burying it, and while the land and cloth touch under the earth, I can neither touch nor see this contact.

This interpretation of a gaze that is simultaneously close and far (I touch with my eyes) emphasizes the paradoxical logic of the threshold between distance and proximity, in the act of sight as an impossible touch. In considering this kind of looking as a force of contact, when I think of the nature of my *being-with-one-another*, I question the kind of space that is created and the acts of the learning self that are possible. Derrida (2005) writes,

If two gazes look into each other’s eyes, can one then say that they are touching? Are they coming into contact—the one with the other? What is contact if it always *intervenes between x and x*? A hidden, sealed, concealed, signed, squeezed, compressed, and repressed interruption? Or the *continual* interruption of an interruption, the negating upheaval of the interval, the death of *between*? (p. 2, italics in original)

I link this curious phrase “death of between” to a Nancean subject, thus expanding my understanding of a continual *becoming* within relation. Derrida’s description of an “interruption of an interruption” has within it a shade of his *différance*, with the implied play between presence and absence, emphasizing the continued referral of signification within meaning. In this case, contact, as an interruption of what exists between two gazes, is disrupted by the very act of the gaze: of the

contact. It is unending and impossible, any final, definitive acquisition of meaning within contact or touch. I satisfy my continued desire *to know* with a partial understanding, as I twist and stitch the fabric into a semblance of the shape it kept underground, and thus reach a closer recognition of this relational threshold of difference: a relation devoid of the sentimental equation that touch equals full understanding and completion.

This implication of an elusive present—that it is impossible to touch—informs the learning subject. I think of my students; their expectations compounded with mine. Within our curricular lives, an acceptance of instability of subjectivity, and a corresponding partiality of knowledge may be key to shifting toward more responsible and



thoughtful student and teacher bodies in relation to each other and to the land. To acknowledge education as a fragment of an emergent self and community suggests a shared vulnerability and flexibility, thus opening the possibility for change.

*Soil* is a creative way to consider *becoming* in the land, inferring a strong connection between our bodies together and within the land that we inhabit, yet there is also a sense that the grasping touch of the present—of this moment—will always elude possession (Miller, 2009). The undercurrent of time always influences metaphors of movement and flow within the dynamic of threshold spaces. This transitory affect influenced my decision to bury cloth as a fragile attempt to resize the scale of thought to body, and body to soil. This leads me to consider the contact of one with the land. How is this “death of between” to be understood within places we recognize as significant in forming selfhood?

Many of us are invisibly bound to places by a sense of belonging as we come to embody specific places we call home. Tuan (1977) notes that there are influential aesthetic and sensual components to the ways that we experience space and place. On an emotional level, powerful feelings of belonging can be understood as the psychological connection between self and place, metaphorically eliminating distance. Yet, if touch is understood as a site of the creation of meaning and of an emergent self (intangible as it may be), how is the emotional attachment that people hold with regard to the land to be reconciled? There is clearly tension between this interpretation of touch and the popular notion of sentimental touching and

owning the land: for example, the positive, aesthetic response that many feel when viewing images of wilderness.

An alternative way of considering personally significant places is found in Kwon's (2002) consideration of the subject and place as convoluted and multi-faceted. Westerners often exist firmly planted and also perpetually uprooted in/from places. Kwon reframes the duality of the singular and multiple place of the emergent subject with regard to art and artistic site, where the phenomenological, physical place that informs who we have become is carried with us through memory as we envision a nomadic sense of place in current culture. She posits that while we are connected to a physical place to which we feel an emotional bond, we are also influenced in various ways by global spaces. Rather than a narrow quest for an original source of identity within a particular place, as some views of nationalism assert and promote, the subject is vitally more flexible, shifting within each context and relation. So while I value the influences that places have on my sense of self, this is only a part of my comprehension of existence in relation. Thus, my burial site is but one singular touch of being/becoming in the world.



Figure 5. *Soil*, by Patti Pente. Mixed media. Photo credit: Monica Emme.

As I sewed, stapled, and wrapped the fabric, I reinforced this idea of physical pressure of the earth on cloth. Metaphorically, under a Nancean influence, this landscape art references the philosophical pressure of touch on the formation of the subject. Within these smells and textures of the earth, pungent, yet oddly cleansing as I loosen the “soiled” fabric from the soil, I continue to loosen sub-

jectivity from a static position; and, in education, I continue to loosen pedagogy from the grip of modernist presence. By approaching learning as a moment of relation, as a singularity, I reposition the idea of an education from a product to be obtained by a preconceived subject to a process of a continually emergent self and community, sharing and creating knowledge.

The shift in value from learning outcomes and numerical scores that structure many curricula to include the process of creative, aesthetic inquiry can be a powerful move toward more versatile, equitable learning environments. Therefore, I reject a politics of a certain and substantial selfhood in favor of an opening to-

ward contingency, context, and indeterminacy. This is central to notions of social change and agency. It is from within this kind of uncertainty and emergence that I research, I teach, and I envision a better world. Through my art and writing, I seek infinite versions of “the death of between.”

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