32. ARTS, LETTERS & NUMBERS: SITUATING ENGAGEMENTS WITH MATERIAL AND EXPERIENTIAL GEOGRAPHIES

The ubiquitous observation of our time is transformation: cultural, technological, social, political, economical, and geological. We are in the midst of unprecedented re-alignments and re-articulations of every aspect of our lives. There are people and institutions across all disciplines and across the globe that are increasingly confronted by the need for new models of asking the extraordinarily complex questions of our time. The challenges, possibilities of our moment are extraordinary; they call for creative urgency, considered stewardship, and new spaces bringing together diverse voices.

Arts Letters & Numbers, a workshop conducted in summer 2012, involving 30 participants from 12 countries, is just such a space. It offered a new approach to constructing alternative pathways of interaction among a wide range of individuals, disciplines and geographies.

Education, by definition, is a transformative pursuit; individuals come together and engage in transformative interactions and experiences. Today, education in the broadest sense holds the capacity of developing new pathways of interaction and forms of knowledge that address the challenges of our increasingly complex world. Each discipline affords us distinct modes of thinking and acting, of articulating: light, substance, space, energy, voice, and thought; they provide elements of perception, comprehension, and engagement. While each discipline presents unique means of comprehending and acting, together they have a shared capacity to, at once, provide the instruments to create transformation and the principles to measure and withstand its consequences. Like many complex structures, such as language or molecular configurations, disciplines are polymorphic. That is to say they can exist in more than one form, they can take on different meanings and organizations depending on their context and environment. In this sense, to gather disciplines within a geographic and intellectual proximity is to create potential for a dynamic disciplinary geography.
One of the core ideas of the Theory of Evolution is this: when individual agents are brought into proximity they interact, building new linkages. Under the right circumstances, these interactions create transformation, developing new forms. Knowledge evolves; creating circumstances of proximity and interaction among a great diversity of agency is fundamental to the emergence of new forms of knowledge. Building new linkages between our spatial, temporal, material, and disciplinary geographies where diverse agencies interact will undoubtedly develop new thought processes and new questions.

The workshop developed as a dynamic series of situations engaging multiple disciplinary, material, and experiential geographies. Taking place outdoors in a large open field, it set up conversations between space, substance, time, light, gravity and memory, people, their work, and the open field. This conversation took place with an acute appreciation of the field itself as a part of
the continuous geography of the solar system. The hope was for individuals to sense the inef-
fable reality of being within this vast space and time, and to build connections and new linkages
between their questions and the spatial temporal geography of the universe.

Notes

1) Circles: Drawing on Friendship started with the perception that we are in the cosmos and the cosmos is
in us. Together we asked: How can we create situations that amplify our capacity to listen (to the cosmos
and each other) and ask our questions. Working with the elements: fire, water, air and earth, we began to
draw them out, drawn them up, this led to a series of comprehensions and actions and then acting and
acts. Working with the elements of film, music, voice and bodies we drew on friendship and discovered an
emergent libretto between us. The precisions of our emotive embodied knowledge crafted this libretto into
a live opera.

2) I have barely caught my breath...40 people from 12 countries spend three weeks renovating an abandoned
boarded up building into a place that could work for this project. The construction built an energy and
intensity that rolled right into the workshop: Expansive and very close, deep: Each moment was the start
of a new story; each photo was the first frame of a new film (lived and shot) sun, fire and filament at the
same time. Enormous fires (30 ft in diameter!) then the next day, a master calligrapher from Iran made an
enormous Noon with our bodies...then talks on surfing, rap, photography, film, finance, ethics, poetics, race
cars, prison, print making, dancers...it just never stopped and it all fed into the work. Deeply human and
connected to the cosmos...the big drawing you see hanging in the space is a sun made by the earth and the
rain: a huge pile of dirt put on paper outside in the field...then the rain came, the pile of dirt was tall enough
that the water did not get to the paper in the middle but only at the edges...so we get an inverse of the
earth....a sun made by the earth and the rain. We had at least a thousand such moments...fire and its draw-
ings, found gravel inside...then walking through the gates made by fire...to find tea and touch. Masks from
clay cut out of the earth with pick axes, sledge hammers becoming violins, bathrooms becoming cameras
obscures, screams caught in glass jars and released later as song, pianos being plucked by a frenzy of hands
as they rose in the elevator, water being transferred between bowls by soaking towels and wringing them
out; wringing out the tears. All of these Circles were Drawing on Friendship, drawing out human emotions;
capturing expressions of our emotive experiences, some in words, but many before and beyond language...a
new kind of libretto...a new opera...a new film...a new school.