

# Being with A/r/tography

Stephanie Springgay, Rita L. Irwin,  
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*SensePublishers*

BEING WITH A/R/TOGRAPHY



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A/r/tographers call out to one another from many different locations in many different voices, all enthused with the possibilities of attending to other ways of creating, researching, and teaching in rhizomatic connections without end. We look forward to this community expanding in hopeful ways as more and more artists and researchers and teachers recognize themselves in the following poetic invitation by Carl Leggo, and in the many invitations offered in *Being with A/r/tography*:

### A TANGLE OF LINES

we need a poetic line,  
not a prosaic line,  
a line that plays with possibilities of  
space,  
draws attention to itself,  
contravenes convention,  
will not parade from left to right margins,  
back and forth, as if there is  
nowhere else  
to explore, knows instead lived experience  
knows little of linearity  
knows the only linearity  
we know is the linearity  
of the sentence

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

which waddles across the page like lines of penguins, sentenced by the sentence

to the lie

of linearity,

chimeric sense of order, born of rhetoric,

and so instead a/r/tographers weave their ways in tangled lines,

know wholeness

in holes and gaps, in fragments

that refract light with fractal abandon, and savour

the possibilities of prepositions and conjunctions

LORRI NEILSEN

## FOREWORD

We are the blood in all the languages that create us: sound, movement, word, image, colour, touch. Our season is short, but if we think for a moment that what we say and do goes unnoticed, we are mistaken. We are connected in infinite ways across time and space. When we hear of another roadside bomb on the other side of the planet, our tissues chill; another natural disaster, and we are alert to signs around us. Our capacity to imagine allows us to take pleasure in others' joy, to cringe at others' pain, to be present even when we are not. Our capacity to imagine gives shape and direction to how we, as a species, learn from one another and transform our experience. We are connected.

There is a net, it is said, over the palace of the Buddhist god Indra, and on each of the knots of the net is a jewel; each of the jewels reflects and extends the light in all the others. When we understand this resonance in terms of how we create, teach, and inquire alongside one another, we recognize the incalculable abundance of the one in the many and the many in the one and our collective capacity to effect change.

Basho says that change in the universe is the basis of art:

Cherry blossoms whirl, leaves fall, and the wind flits them both along the ground. We cannot arrest with our eyes or our ears what lies in such things.

Were we to gain mastery over them, we would find that the life of each thing would vanish without a trace. (cited in Hass, 1994, p.233)

We can extend Basho's thoughts to include research and teaching—the basis of each of these practices is change; to arrest these processes is to reject their *duende*, their spirit.

The insights gathered in this fine collection provide multi-faceted perspectives on the nature and aims of *a/r/tography*; as well, they open us to its profound possibilities for generating new connections and apprehending the depth, the shadows, and the responsibilities such new connections create. This is a fluid, generative, heuristic enterprise, this *a/r/tography*, in tune with truths that prevail, even as the contextual, political, and sociological dimensions of learning and inquiry realign them in new ways. And we know language always catches us—and itself—out; even the concept 'truth', waiting patiently with its bulging suitcases at the door, has learned to accept a place to rest for awhile, but to prepare for change.

About twenty years ago, after studying as an ethnographer and undertaking research in literacy—particularly in contexts where women worked and learned—I began to chafe at what research seemed to demand of me as an educator and artist. I was not alone in my unease: the language for the enterprise suggested a uniform and weapons would be necessary—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 sensemaking 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. A living inquiry, the kind of research I am drawn to and began at that time to immerse myself in, was best undertaken outside the academy in community and personal settings where the false distinctions we create between the personal and the professional fall away: the academy of the kitchen table, as I referred to it then. It was, as well, the academies—or the bodies—of the boreal forest, the Atlantic coastline, urban street performance, a shelter, hospice centre, or skateboard park. All this inquiry asks is that we attend, that we listen (Neilsen, 2003), attune ourselves so that we may come to our senses (Neilsen, 1998).

The research many of us once apprenticed ourselves to has lost its authority, and for many reasons, not least of which is that we have lost faith—there’s that word again—in the values it stood for, including the investment in epistemological hierarchies for understanding human behaviour and creativity. The impulses, insights, and corporeal understandings such as those revealed here in this collection make apparent instead what we have always known: that human inquiry is as complex, generative, curious, conflicted, nuanced, dark, particular, transitory, changeable, enduring, and hopeful as is a single human life—mine, yours, that of an Iranian child, an African grandmother, a Canadian adolescent. Human inquiry is what life is; it is that simple. The language we have learned so well to use for building frames and fences, theories and theologies, and—especially in education over the last sixty years—to create specious divisions and to play methodological games is a language we continue to question. We have so many languages available to us; a/r/tography’s richness brings these to bear, and in doing so, deepens what it means to inquire. We know that to live with curiosity, compassion, integrity and mindfulness is to inquire; to know, as Heraclitus did, that we cannot step in the same river twice, is to inquire. To engage in a living inquiry is to learn to let go, to leave the spurious safety of Research—that crumbling roof over Education that often separated us from life and rarely protected us anyway—and to enter an open field, ears and wings bristling.

The world of inquiry in other disciplines is similarly restless: our conversations with colleagues across the spectrum of inquiry—art, aesthetics, philosophy, spirituality, ethics, poetics, among other threads—have created new and stimulating connections. Genres are regendering and this regeneration is giving us hope that the work we do might matter after all. After all—and for all. A/r/tography, as we see from the essays here, is invitational at its core.

And what again of those truths? As philosopher Emmanuel Levinas (cited in Hand, 1989) says, “the subject who speaks...is situated in relation to the Other.... By offering a word, the subject putting himself forward lays himself open and, in a sense, prays” (p.149). Simone Weil (2004) suggests that faith is a process of

## FOREWORD

emptying out oneself, scouring out the self in order to be taken up, fully, giving oneself over to—in her case—her god. To open ourselves to work such as the inquiry we read here—work that by its nature is generous and generative and keeps the wilderness inside of us alive—will feed our faith in human possibility.



RITA L. IRWIN AND STEPHANIE SPRINGGAY

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AS PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

*Being With A/r/tography* is a collection of essays that perform a/r/tographical research. Each author's explorations of a/r/tography embed the practice of living inquiry in and through the arts in diverse and divergent ways. The book is framed around three sections and concludes with a discussion chapter that continues to raise questions about the processes and challenges of doing a/r/tographical research. Each section opens with an essay by one of the editors and illuminates the complexities of a/r/tographical research. A/r/tography, we maintain, is concerned with self-study, being in community, relational and ethical inquiry, and as such the three sections are organized around these guiding principles. This, however, is not to suggest that each chapter is limited in its discussion of one single thematic understanding, but rather these sections are intended to allow for the imbrication of each into the other.

In this introductory chapter, we introduce the features of a/r/tography. We draw on scholarship from philosophy, phenomenology, educational action research, feminist theories, and contemporary art criticism to theorize the methodology of a/r/tography, with an attention to the *in-between* where meanings reside in the simultaneous use of language, images, materials, situations, space and time.

A/r/tography has grown out of a fluid and constantly evolving community, and the chapters in this collection are evidence of the various understandings and practices inherent in this methodology. The chapters are not meant to provide a linear nor rigid structure through which one could define a/r/tography. Rather, the chapters work in tension with each other, sometimes complementing and extending one another, while at other times becoming discordant. This tension, we argue, is important to the evolution of the methodology and to the substantive features of the inquiry itself. A/r/tographical research is not subject to standardized criteria, rather it remains dynamic, fluid, and in constant motion.

In what follows, we establish the theoretical features of doing a/r/tographical research and of becoming an a/r/tographer. The thematic sections further develop a/r/tographical concepts and provide examples of what it is like to be in the midst of a/r/tographical research.



We're waiting for the bus that travels South on Granville Street in Vancouver, British Columbia. For weeks we've been staring down the street from the bus stop at a storefront window that appears to function as a type of shelter for the public—sometimes seemingly random people stop and step inside only to emerge again and continue on their journey. It dawns on us one morning, when the coffee is extra

## IRWIN AND SPRINGGAY

the Canadian artist Germaine Koh at the Katriona Jeffries Gallery. *Shell* is one of Koh's recent explorations into the behaviours and situations that define and construct public and private space. Fashioned from aluminum, plexiglass and plywood, Koh has modified the glass-fronted private space of the gallery. An enclosure is built on the inside of the space, attached to the existing glass front of the gallery, but with a pane of glass removed in order to create free access to the structure from the street. In contrast to the gallery, the public has access to this space 24 hours a day. Resembling a bus shelter, and conjuring up metaphors of crustacean shells (Szewczyk, 2005), this in-between space is both and neither private or public. It exposes the vulnerability of private space, the fragility of safety, seclusion, and property (Koh, 2005). As Monica Szewczyk (2005) writes in the exhibition text, Koh's space accentuates both the contemplation of time, and the wasting or killing of time. Koh's architectural intervention is a transitory space, waiting to be filled and acted upon, inviting participation in the in-between. It is this openness, uncertainty, and exposure of meaning that situates this work and others like it as potential acts that allow us to inquire into and create new models for thinking and conducting research. Just as Koh's art presents a vulnerable space between private and public, how might we begin to think of research methodologies as relational situations that provoke meaning through contemplation, complication, and as alternative models of space and time?

A/r/tography is a research methodology that entangles and performs what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) refer to as a rhizome. A rhizome is an assemblage that moves and flows in dynamic momentum. The rhizome operates by variation, perverse mutation, and flows of intensities that penetrate meaning, opening it to what Jacques Derrida (1978) calls the "as yet unnameable which begins to proclaim itself" (p.293). It is an interstitial space, open and vulnerable where meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured. Building on the concept of the rhizome, a/r/tography radically transforms the idea of theory as an abstract system distinct and separate from practice. In its place, theory is understood as a critical exchange that is reflective, responsive and relational, which is continuously in a state of reconstruction and becoming something else altogether. As such, theory *as* practice becomes an embodied, living space of inquiry (Meskimmon, 2003).

In turn, rhizomes activate the *in-between*; an invitation to explore the interstitial spaces of art making, researching, and teaching. According to Elizabeth Grosz (2001):

The space of the in-between is the locus for social, cultural and natural transformations: it is not simply a convenient space for movements and realignments but in fact is the only place—the place around identities, between identities—where becoming, openness to futurity, outstrips the conservational impetus to retain cohesion and unity. (pp. 91-105)

Like Koh's *Shell*, the in-between disrupts dualisms (private and public or neither). Similarly, it is not merely a physical location or object but a *process*, a movement and displacement of meaning (Grosz, 2001). Contemporary art criticism argues that the relationship between artist and place is a complex discourse where place is

## A/R/TOGRAPHY AS PRACTICE-BASED RESEARCH

re-imagined as “situation”. Site moves from a fixed geographical category to a relational constitution of social, economic, cultural and political processes (Doherty, 2004; Kwon, 2002). Process becomes intertextually and multiply located in the context of discursive operations. It is a process of invention rather than interpretation, where concepts are marked by social engagements and encounters. Again we turn to Deleuze and Guattari (1994) and their arguments: “[c]oncepts are centres of vibrations, each in itself and every one in relation to all the others. This is why they all resonate rather than cohere or correspond with each other” (p.23). Meaning and understanding are no longer revealed or thought to emanate from a point of origin, rather they are *complicated* as relational, rhizomatic, and singular.<sup>1</sup>

A/r/tography as practice-based research is situated in the in-between, where theory-as-practice-as-process-as-complication intentionally unsettles perception and knowing through living inquiry. Our chapter will examine the constructs and conditions of a/r/tographical research: as practice-based research, as communities of practice, as relational aesthetics and through six renderings of engagement. The chapter further complicates the space of doing a/r/tographical research, unfolding a series of questions about the possibilities and challenges of practicing this form of qualitative research.

### *Practice-Based Theoretical Underpinnings*

Our understandings of practice-based research are informed by feminist, post-structuralist, hermeneutic and other postmodern theories that understand the production of knowledge as difference thereby producing different ways of living in the world (St. Pierre, 2000). One way of understanding this is through theories of touch and intercorporeality (Springgay, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006; Springgay & Freedman, 2007). Western thought has been primarily influenced by Cartesian rationalism which isolates the distinct and autonomous subject, whose “vision” of the world is separate and distanced from the object perceived. “I see” is commonly understood to mean “I know”. Thus, distant, objective vision is a means by which to judge or examine phenomena. However, a phenomenological, feminist, and/or a/r/tographical approach to understanding through touch reconfigures the ways in which we perceive objects, providing access to depth and surface, inside and outside (Grosz, 1994; Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Touch expresses active involvement with the subject matter. Touch becomes a mode of knowing through proximity and relationality and poses different ways of making sense of the world, challenging the mechanisms of visual perception. Similarly, it draws attention to sensory experiences and knowledge that is interconnected with our bodies and with others.

In contrast to rationalist thought which imposes system and order, classifying and categorizing the world in dualistic terms (where individual consciousness is viewed as private, self-contained, and invisible), theories of touch propose that subjects are interconnected. According to Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1968), “to comprehend is to apprehend by coexistence” (p.188), and Jean Luc Nancy (2000) re-iterates this concept maintaining that meaning is constituted between beings. A/r/tography resides in this intercorporeal space, and attends to the forms and folds