

Crossing the Waterline: An Autoethnographic “Living Inquiry”

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ABSTRACT

In this essay, I inquire phenomenologically into a gesture that I performed and documented through photography. This gesture is significant because it has led me to consider the resistant edge of myself as an artist, researcher, and educator. It is from this resistant edge that I find myself crossing a metaphorical waterline. Waterlines mark the liminal threshold between water and air, i.e., the point of conscious awareness—of breath—below which lay the unknown. This metaphor has helped me become aware of myself as artist, writer, learner, and teacher. In this art essay of my living inquiry into a performed gesture within an art installation, I discovered the waterline of a self-censored voice.

Crossing the Waterline

Sitting between two water-filled metal containers with four burning candles in glass, I open the gesture of breathlessness with the words: “the breathless realm of an altered, subconscious state.” Living inquiry is “not a philosophy of life, a methodology to be followed, or an analytical tool.... it is simply an inquiry into how to live with the quality of awareness that sees newness, truth, and beauty in daily life” (Meyer, 2005, p. 11). I sought such awareness through digital photographic documentation of my performed ritualistic gesture within my art exhibition, *Who will read this body?* in April 2004, at the University of British Columbia’s AMS Gallery. (See Figure 1.)



Figure 1. Photograph of the artist, Barbara Bickel, with installation, “To find traces of her estrangement” in *Who will read this body?* (a thesis exhibition at the University of British Columbia, AMS Gallery in 2004). The art installation is made of galvanized tin, water, candles, b/w photographs, thread, plumbers glue, and water resistant tape. Each of the containers are 59 x 8 x 10 inches.

"The artist's voice owes its power to the fact that it arises from a pregnant solitude," which emerges in gestures prior to logical discourse and explanation (A. Maraux cited in Beittel & Beittel, 1991, p. 41).

As an a/r/tographer, I have made a commitment to an inner collaborative relationship of creating, researching, and educating my artist-self, researcher-self and teacher-self (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). Self, nature, and culture integrate in my art and writing (-graphy) practices as artist/researcher/teacher (a/r/t). Metaphor/metonymy, one of the six renderings in a/r/tography, is the focus of this essay (Irwin, 2004). As an artist I have communicated most through the metaphoric element of water. Through living inquiry of a gesture of crossing a waterline with persistence and focused awareness, I find myself within the metaphoric element of air, and at other times earth. For the past thirteen years, within my spiritual feminist practice, water has continued to symbolize the subconscious; air the intellect, as earth symbolizes history and memory. The fourth element of fire, symbolizes transformation and propulsion forward in life. These elements engaged through art assist in communication between the known and the unknown (Beittel, 1983).

I prepared for a ritual of writing on the body [not "artist writing"] by fasting. I was also in the bleeding phase of my menstrual cycle. Although I had planned to write on my body with cosmetic pencils, inspired by Grahn (1999) one witness to this ritual that took place in a forest asked if I intended to use my menstrual blood as ink. I quickly decided it was most appropriate to use the ink of my body in this body/writing ritual. The ritual was documented in video and in black and white photographs. Ritual, as I work with it, essentially includes: an a-rational sacred practice of trans-egoic respect/awareness/openness to the creative interaction of physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual realities, within nature, culture and self, for the purpose of transformation.

At one point during the experience I was shocked and embarrassed in a moment of self-conscious judgment by the extreme and vulnerable act of writing on my naked body with menstrual blood (see Figure 2). For the installation piece "To find traces of her estrangement," I created a container in which to ritually lay my documented struggle. The container was filled with water and the photos were submerged within the gentle liquid. This is where the vigil, the tangible record and witness (in

the form of photos) of the endurance and struggle of an emergent inquiry process as led by ritual, was kept and the waterline was exposed.

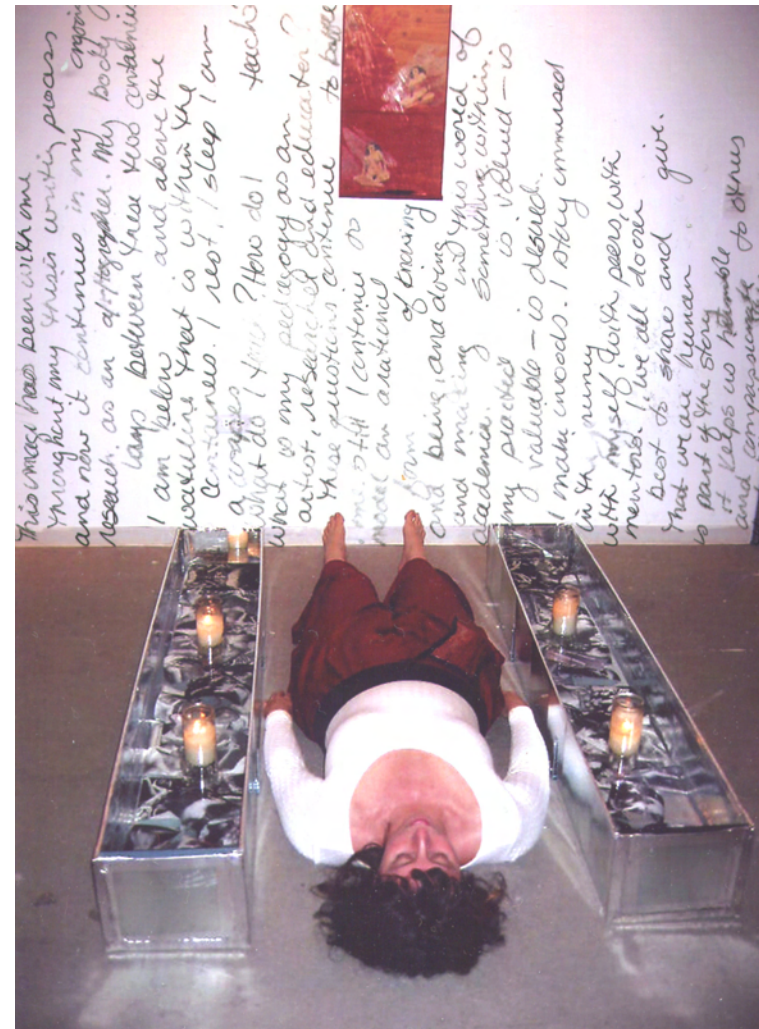


Figure 2. Altered photograph of the artist with her installation "To find traces of her estrangement" in *Who will read this body?*

Entry

Inhale.

Unplanned, I lay down for the photograph (see Figure 2) and my

body fit perfectly between the two water-filled metal containers. This act completed the art installation of metal, water, and fire with my living breathing flesh. Simultaneously, perhaps paradoxically, it held reverberations of my funerary body written within it.

By writing her self, woman will return to the body which has been confiscated from her, which has been turned into the uncanny stranger on display— the ailing or dead figure... the cause and location of inhibitions. Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. (Cixous, 1975/1997, p. 350)

My passion as an artist has been to reclaim the body, led by a desire to fully understand and know its wisdom. The body has been a constant teacher and home for me in the midst of an unstable, and often threatening and silencing world. I filter questions and ideas through my body. It is within my body that grief and joy find a voice and where I can always ground myself within an awareness of self integrated with nature and culture. My body is my waterline, a point of conscious awareness.

After the gallery performance ritual dress rehearsal I was photographed by a friend as I lay on the floor between the installation pieces, dressed in my performance ritual costume in a yoga corpse pose with feet pointing towards the wall piece entitled *Spinning Red Words on Wood*. I was struck by the mythological death and transformation story unfolding in this photo enactment. Red, black, and white colors, traditionally worn at funerals and weddings in many cultures to represent life and death, are the colors of my photo-documented gesture. Within the metal containers were black and white documentary photographs of me in the forest writing on my body with menstrual blood and cosmetic pencils. (See Figure 3).

I was compelled to exhibit these photos but did not want to give the viewers direct access to them as our contemporary experience with photographs of naked women is steeped in the voyeuristic visual culture of male-dominated photography (Nead, 1992; Stewart, 1993). These photos are documentation of a sacred process not meant for viewing out of context. By sacred I mean honoring, receiving, and holding reverence for the spirit of mystery. Ritual theorist Ronald Grimes (1995) wrote

“Sacred” is the name we give to the deepest forms of receptivity in our experience” (p. 69). In order to break the cultural and habitual voyeuristic viewing of the photographs, the photos were submerged in water, illuminated by two tall glass-encased white candles that ritually burned throughout the entire show. A ritual vigil is suggested by the candles burning above the waterline, and eventually burning below it throughout the duration of the exhibition. The water, along with floating red threads, embodied the metaphor of life’s blood, acting as a protective veil over the photos. Through ritual, water takes me to alternate realms, into places of mystery. Placing the photos under water symbolically required the viewer to leave the familiar element of air and to pass visually through to an alternate realm (water) in order to gain access to the images.



Figure 3. Detail of “To find traces of her estrangement” (Bickel, 2004)

The structure of the floor installation created a path that led to the last art piece created in this body of work, which hung on the wall, entitled *Spinning Red Words on Wood*. (See Figure 4.) While sitting in the gallery, during the week long exhibit, I observed that if people did

not take the time to walk around and through the floor piece they did not reach the wall piece. The unwillingness to descend ritually and engage/perform with the waterline of the floor piece seemed to distance and keep hidden the transcendent image on the wall.

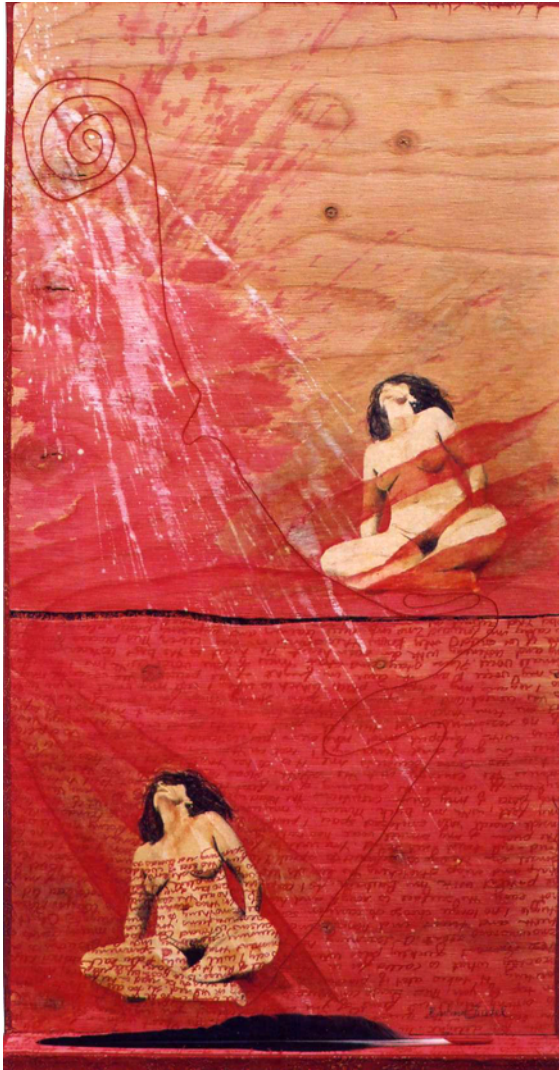


Figure 4. Photograph by Barbara Bickel (2004) of her work, "Spinning Red Words on Wood" in *Who will read this body?* It is mixed media on wood, 22 x 12 x 2 inches.

The creation of *Spinning Red Words on Wood* was a meditative experience that felt like an important act of completion. This was the last piece of art that I created for this body of work, *Who will read this body?* During its creation I listened to Sufi trance music, which deepened the meditative feel of the art making experience. The double figures in the piece sit cross-legged in a Kundalini yogic movement, spinning. They are in an environment of red-stained wood and inverted hand-written red words; stream of consciousness writing. A spiral of red thread inhabits the upper left portion of the piece, its tail trailing towards the spinning figures. On a small wooden ledge at the bottom of the piece lies a single crow feather, its writing tip dipped in red paint. For a number of years I have found myself collecting crow feathers (see Figure 5). In some First Nations stories crows are the messengers of death. I hesitated before adding the black feather to the art, as I was not clear on what it symbolized within the piece. The piece felt more like an experience of the ecstatic, of life, rather than of death. Despite this, I chose to add the feather for its aesthetic qualities, recognizing and accepting its meaning as a messenger of death more fully in the context of the gallery installation as the art pieces and space were performed by the viewers and myself. Upon reflection and in retrospect I understand why I did not censor this uncanny object in the art-making process. Similar to Surrealists' inclusion in their art of an uncanny object, I discovered that "the sensation of the uncanny oscillates between the familiar and the unfamiliar, between appearance and actuality...the uncanny exists at the threshold of religion, imbuing ordinary phenomena with fearsome energy" (Rabinovitch, 2002, p. 15).

In viewing the wall art juxtaposed with my exposed photographed body metaphorically submerged in water without breath; I realized how the source of breath that was being blocked by the water, could be returned by looking up to view the art hanging above it. This installation piece accompanied by the art image came to represent the descent (death) and return (resurrection) of my a/r/tographic ritual journey. Death and loss co-appear alongside transformation and growth as markers of the cycle of life and learning. Cixous (1975/1997) wrote of the importance of death in re-inscribing the whole woman, "We must kill the false woman who is preventing the live one from breathing. Inscribe the breath of the whole woman" (p. 351).

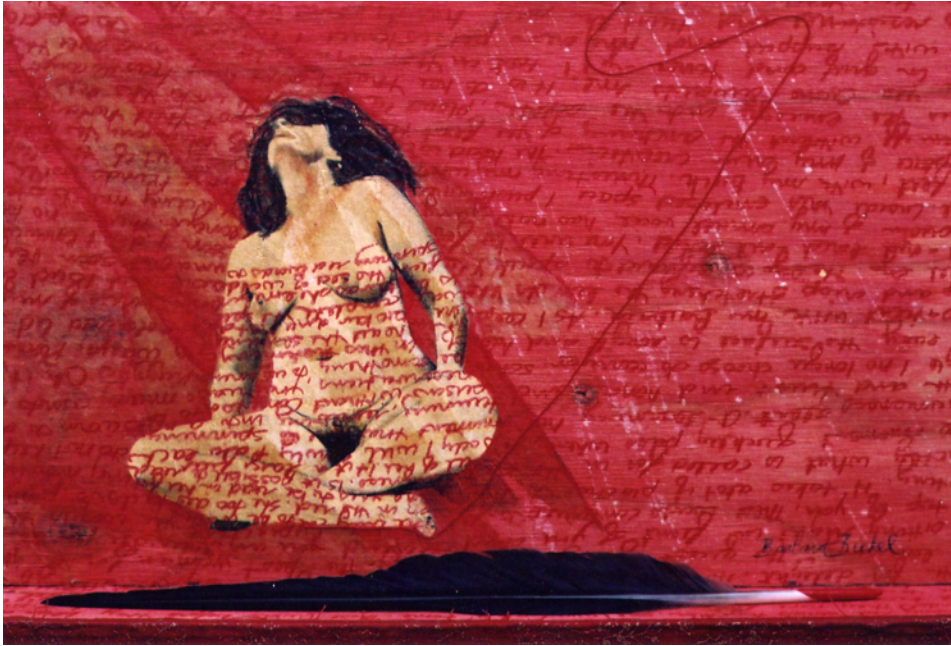


Figure 5. Photograph by Barbara Bickel (2004) of a detail of her work, "Spinning Red Words on Wood" in *Who will read this body?* It is mixed media on wood, 22 x 12 x 2 inches.

I have struggled with the limitations of the modern art world and the role of the artist within it. I wrote on the photo, filling the naked wall, uncovering another layer of hesitancy and inhibition in the spontaneously written text. The text is secondary, its appearance marks the challenge to move through my embarrassment and shame of its a-rational, stream of consciousness content. The a-rational, as a form of knowing includes the body, the emotions, the senses, intuition, the imagination, creation making, the mystical, spiritual and the relational, alongside the rational. The documented installation photo reveals the metaphoric death and return of a long censored part of myself, my voice. The words that had long been stored below the waterline of my body surfaced and were infused with renewed breath and understanding in this living inquiry.¹

Reflections From Above And Below The Waterline

Exhale.

The waterline as a metaphor can be viewed from afar or entered into.

The breath that we inhale above the waterline expands our lungs, enabling us to speak of thoughts, experiences, and understandings.

Crossing the waterline breaking the resistant meniscus of its surface, transports us into the breathless realm of an altered, subconscious state.

The length of time spent in this submerged, and often marginalized realm, is limited.

We must resurface and cross the threshold of the waterline to refill our lungs.

Too often this occurs before coming to a full understanding of the rich fluid environment that we have been immersed in.

End Note:

1. I would like to acknowledge my studio-mate Mary Blaze for recognizing the significance of the waterline in my art and for suggesting that I explore it further. I would also like to thank my friend Karen Hawkins (1961-2005) for her curious questions and editing of an early draft of this essay, and my partner R. Michael Fisher for his encouragement and patient assistance in the final edition. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my thesis committee Shauna Butterwick (my supervisor), Rita Irwin, and Susan Stewart for traveling the journey with me.

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About the Artist:

Barbara Bickel is an artist, researcher, educator, and independent curator. She is currently working on a Ph.D. in art education in Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her arts-based research is focused on women, spiritual leadership, collaboration, and education. Barbara completed an M.A. in education at the University of British Columbia in 2004. Her thesis was entitled, *From Artist to A/r/tographer: An Autoethnographic Ritual Inquiry into Writing on the Body*. She holds a B.F.A. in painting from the University of Calgary and a B.A. in sociology and art history from the University of Alberta. Her art and performance rituals have been exhibited and performed in Canada since 1991. She is currently represented by the Fran Willis Gallery in Victoria, British Columbia; Kensington Fine Art Gallery in Calgary; and Alberta and School of Ideas Gallery in Welland, Ontario. She co-founded The Centre Gallery (1995-2001), a non-profit women's focused gallery in Calgary, Alberta. Her art and thesis can be viewed on-line at <http://www.barbarabickel.ca>

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