

Art-making and Releasing the Power of Narrative

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To add to our conversation on narrative today, I asked the question "how might the arts release the power of narrative differently than other forms of narrative?" What is arts's value in this conversation?

First of all, art-making is a form of understanding born out of mindful attention, that I describe as an apophatic epistemological, small humble gesture. Though the active practice of making—using material stuff and only sometimes words—artists come to insight, come to *know* through trusting *unknowing*.

(slide 2) As Dewey knew, art *constitutes* an experience—does not merely reproduce one. And experiences are usually narrative.

(slide 3) Art and narrative both stimulate memory (when we tell a story and show visuals in our lectures, students recall far more...80% versus 20% , in fact)

(slide 4-6) And art can potently crystallize and convey mystifying quantities of data. Maps for instance condense complex information into a single image that would be very difficult to describe with words;

(slide 7-9) sense-making patterns can emerge out of rhizomatic clouds of complexity, Releasing understanding, comprehension is instant.

(slide 10-16) Through images, history has been changed, and self-delusional rationalizations exposed;

(slide 17-19) complex narrative arcs are conveyed through single visual images;

(slide 20-23) through images we make sense of our world, extending our looking into the universe and under our skin.

(slide 24) Through images we know in a flash what might have taken an entire book to convey or absorb. Images crystallize and cut through vast quantities of complex data, information and narratives. But conveying content is a very small part of the artist's task.

(slide 25) Images have proliferated in unprecedented ways in our visually saturated society. Manufactured images surround us. Compared with what images a medieval person might have seen in one day, in 2013 we are bombarded with visual information. Now, practices of looking in our society are complex, we do not just automatically believe and absorb everything- we routinely engage in critical, resistant and oppositional looking. But long looking, even critically, exerts an influence on the narrative we understand as our own.

(slide 26) Images are powerful, in part, because we are hardwired to believe and imitate them (something to do with mirror neurons). That makes art an exceedingly powerful force-that unconsciously shapes and forms us, exerting enormous influence over, for example, identity construction. Aristotle, Jung, Louis Althusser, Rene Girard, even Dove's anti ad campaign, all, using slightly different terminology, point to how powerfully our natures are mimetic. Onslaught's concluding tag is: *Talk to your daughter before the beauty industry does,*

(slide 27) Evolution shows the progressive transformation from one face to the next via photoshop, and its tag is "no wonder our perception of beauty is distorted" Looking at an image, a mirror or another breathing, human being, we imitate. Narrative epistemologies can be acquired through visual as well as textual means, as the sad statistics on eating disorders, even on our own campus, attests to.

(slide 28) Critical tools and mindful pedagogy are necessary to hone our visual practices, as much as our intellect. In an increasingly media-saturated society, meaning is made and disseminated through the visual, making this field increasingly necessary to any leadership or educational vision.

(slide 29) Given how significantly our culture is immersed in visual images, and the extent with which we make meaning with images, becoming fluent in this potent language is absolutely essential.

(slide 30) But visual images are not simply another code with which to translate data or narratives. Art is made within a web of historical, critical and theoretical contexts and requires our whole selves—mind, body and soul.

Art releases the power of narrative by integrating knowledge of history, skills, and theory with lived experience, embodied data and sensory perceptual honing. Visual art is enacted by an embodied maker, made manifest through the material experiential realm and is received through another body, creating a web of culturally mediated, affective, sensory and intellectual encounters. Art expresses and fosters insight in materialized experiential rather than propositional language. As Dewey said, art constitutes an experience.

(slide 31) Artists construct meaning releasing the power of narrative by creating in the contested interstitial spaces between embodied awareness, sense perception, imagination and reason; enthusiasm, dream, and disaster; affect, intuition, and intellect; wordless, timeless, experiences of 'unknowing' and those 'known' through our embodied existence.

(slide 32) Art-making and narrative, thus share in the sense-making aspect of life. We tell stories and make art to figure out who we are, and what we are doing here. For Ricoeur understanding depends on forming a narrative about an experience and for Anosh Irani "Whenever there is pain it is time to start telling stories." The artist follows the lead of embodied data in to the unknown to come to insight. Artists make images not so much to describe something but to figure something out, and sometimes to heal. Art is a practice of inquiry and a means by which we come to insight and understanding.

No matter what time period, all societies make meaning—come to insight—through art. Churchill famously responded in horror to the wartime suggestion that arts budgets be slashed to address the budgetary deficit, saying, "For what then are we fighting?" In a world increasingly defined through visual means, exploring, honing and discovering the

potency of this visual language is a critical and exhilarating endeavour. Art ignites understanding, creates and critiques the narratives of our culture. Art wakes us up, unsettles us, heals us and teaches us. We need art.

(slide 33) Art-making releases the power of narrative by cultivating cognitive complexity. Integrating reason, affect, and intuition with sensory perception, art-making is a lived inquiry that welcomes embodied knowing. Art-making exercises flexible purposing (a skill necessary to navigate change); teaches transmediation (how new knowledge is generated by shifting information through signing systems, one of the reasons why medical schools are recruiting art student; hones sensory perceptual engagement, requires imagination, cultivates creativity, demands innovation and demonstrates a widened definition of what constitutes knowledge. According to recent research, creativity, confidence, problem solving, perseverance, focus, attentiveness, non-verbal communication, collaboration, dedication and accountability are some of the values of an education in the arts.

(slide 34) As technology and globalization rapidly change the economic playing field, STEM (the traditional formula to used to fuel a economy has been transforming to STEAM. Adding Art to Science, Technology, Engineering and Math and is identified as a critical skill that will fuel, imagine and design the next economy. Fluency in this methodology benefits the artist and society. Art-making and narrative both require and exercise a cognitive complexity that is vital to navigating this increasingly complex, diverse, changing world

(slide 35) Although art can be harnessed for a multitude of ends, and as our consumerist commodity culture so clearly demonstrates, art is all too often used as a manipulative tool. Reducing it simply to decoration, entertainment, or using it instrumentally for propaganda or for didactic purposes, diminishes our understanding of art. Nor, in my view, is art's chief task the presentation of Ideal Beauty (the classical theory). This view limits art to mere representation, and misses the sense-making aspect of art situated within the contemporary context.

(slide 36) Contemporary art-making practices exercise complimentary ways of gathering data, synthesizing knowledge and making manifest. Research goals are sought in the studio and gallery with rigor and systematic inquiry. Art-making is a form of

research, whose product is not necessarily word based. Words are obviously not the only meaning making texts. Artists exercise an imaginative intellect creating, criticizing and constructing knowledge that is not only new but has the capacity to transform human understanding (Graham Sullivan). Especially when approached as a practice of inquiry, art making is a rigorous research practice.

Let me give you examples of Canadian artists whose work releases remarkable narratives, whose work does not simply transform ideas or into matter, but whose work makes those revelations actually matter. Each has a deeply ethical, aesthetic vision, and in each case their art calls us to action.

(slide 37) Rebecca Belmore's art bears witness to the sad narrative of first nations cultural genocide in North America;

(slide 38) Brian Jungen's aesthetic narrative wryly subverts the commodification of indigenous culture by appropriating western consumer culture. Nike sneakers are cut up and reassembled into Northwest Coast Aboriginal masks. (39) a double play on appropriated West Coast imagery. (40) White plastic lawn chairs spliced to make a life size skeleton of a whale. Viewers are active; knowing the history of first nations oppression and their representation in mass media is necessary to understand this work. Here he skinned 11 black natuzzi sofas in the Vancouver Art Gallery.

(slide 42-52) Edward Burtynsky's stunningly beautiful large-format photographs horrify the minute we know the image is not a reflected sunset, but a river of nickel tailings. (43) Winner of the 2005 TED prize, Burtynsky documents the catastrophic narrative of environmental degradation/the commodification of the very body of our planet. (44) oil spills off the Gulf of Mexico, (45) manufactured landscapes in Western Australia, (46) Not reflected sunrise but rivers of orange waste. (47) Scarred landscapes, mountains of tires, (48) humanities expanding footprint re-surface the planet. (49) densified oil drums, (50) phone cord playgrounds (51) wire yards (52) plastic toy part dumps. With art and narrative he invites a global conversation on sustainability.

Burtynsky started out by making pretty pictures of ideal beauty. He would not be an artist of international stature, an artist who is making a difference in the world, if he held the Classical definition or if he viewed art as decoration... Rather he scrutinizes self and the world, looks with clear eye and invites us to come to our senses.

(Slide 53) You might recognize that Lady Gaga recently paid homage to Jana Sterbak's work *Vanitas: Flesh Dress for an Albino Anorexic*. Jana prophetically subverts the rampant commodification of the body we are saturated with in N. America. How do we understand this famous work? Evidence of cultural decay? Or, sign naming the values of a society who treat the body as "new site of colonization Her unconventional materials are chosen deliberately, seeking a direct, expressive relationship between material and idea.

Kristeva writes of this work, "We say Christianity is a religion of the word but it is the word made flesh. Perhaps we have forgotten the message of this religion, that of the permanent joining of the body and signs." Materials carry meaning and if one really believes in the Incarnation, then indwelling flesh is a radical concept that changes how we view everything. If the finite was capable of bearing the infinite once, then that changes how we see all material. It means all material can "sing you" as Rilke put it, the creation is still embedded with the finger print of the creator, and is sacramental, miraculous, not sentimental, the raw potency of material is one of the reasons for art's potency.

(slide 54) Jana's subject is the body, and through the body identity, social conformism and mortality.

(slide 55) The problem with imaging the ideal, is that people recreate themselves in unobtainable images.

(56) We live in a culture saturated with photo-shopped images and wonder why our children are plagued with eating disorders. Imaging an unobtainable ideal leads to a culture of shame, and heartbreaking heroic attempts by our children to recreate themselves in Calvin Klein's image, teaches them codes of a very superficial type. Imaging this ideal leaves out the insight that Jean Vanier, Henri Nouwen and Simone Weil knew and Leonard Cohen sang about "*there is a crack in everything. That how the light gets in.*" Certainly addressing and coming along side of suffering and imperfection is a path far closer to the message of the cross and a far better fit with the *Imago Dei*.

(slides 57) My work has long imaged not the ideal figure but the aging, (58)

suffering, (59)wounded, (60) lamenting body, (61)reaching, (62)inhaling/exhaling, (63) praying, (64) suspended and (65) precariously balancing body. Small gestures, no triumphalism, there is no longer a cultural appetite for triumphalism. What might get through is humility, honesty, no sentimentality, no perfection. Manifesting Nouwen's insight that "unless we acknowledge our own woundedness we cannot do any good for others."

(slide 66) 7 years ago an exhibition of my work *Being Text and Time* opened at the Bellevue gallery. The work was of course filled with bodies, and silent planes of steel, materials like wax and plains of liminal colour but it was also filled with a variety of other meaning making texts-like topographical and depth maps, stock market reports, written texts, medical imagery-the kinds of signs we routinely go about decoding in our everyday lives. (67,68) so here we see the figure layered with a textual dialogue between Hiedegger, Derrida and the poet Rainer Maria Rilke—and medical imagery- an ECG reading runs along the bottom. I was asking the question what is it like to be a body, to navigate or make meaning, in this particular historical time and place, and how do we respond to the invitation of a living God here and now? So I drew the exterior of the body, and used medical imagery as a way to map the body's interior, ECG reading (69) but also MRI's and PET scans, and I sequenced together meaning making texts in Saussurean strings of signifiers, this is called *fragments of your ancient name* and (70) created crossword puzzles of signifiers called Wittgensteinian Language Games. (slide 8-10) Many of these strings of signifiers became enormous 5' x 20' pieces in which I collaborated with others. And all contained medical imagery as a means of mapping the interior.

(slide 74)Not long afterwards I had a heart attack.

I was stopped, completely. The research practice I engaged in my studio, predicted what I did not recognize intellectually.

When I returned to my PhD program a year later, my advisors wisely invited me to welcome my lived experience into my research, art-making and pedagogical practices.

What I discovered was very simple.

In order for something new to come into being, what has gone before needs to be stopped.

I was stopped and I learned that this pause, this uncomfortable, scary place of unknowing was generative, was necessary. And instead of fleeing this uncomfortable place I learned to sit with it, be curious about it, enter fully the liminal moment, trust embodied data, and sensory perceptual knowing. I learned that the heart attack was a gift. It invited, enforced really, a pause, so that something new could emerge. I was invited to pay attention, to practice self-emptying listening, and, through the act of making what did emerge, after the pause, was a laugh of insight.

(slide 74) I discovered that art-making/aesthetics enacts/echos the pattern I experienced. I wrote an *Aesthetics of Attentiveness: A Philosophy for Artists and Educators* from the vantage point of the maker of art. I articulate the importance of the (75) Stop, (76)the necessity of paying attention, (77,78,79) the fecundity of self-emptying, the (80)risk of liminal flow and the surprise of surfacing into wide-awakeness. These chapter headings describe a generative pedagogical process that is first of all active.

Art-making is a practice of self-emptying attention; active receptivity opens one to an awareness that can stop hasty conceptualization, incomplete categorization, premature conclusions: the habits of thought that blind us.

(slide 85)Key to art-makings ability to release the power of narrative is being curious about "what we perceive through our senses". And since Descartes *Dioptrics* in 1637, sensory perception has been viewed with suspicion. In *Sources of the Self* Charles Taylor is incredulous at the radical rejection of traditional ontology that the Cartesian revolution begat. Taylor laments the subsequent view of the world as mechanical, disenchanted, that sensory perception ceased to exist as a vehicle for psychic or expressive content or as a medium through which the spiritual could appear. But we know the world through a porous interplay between our bodies and our cultural/social situations and Abram, Appelbaum, Sir Ken Robinson, the Chilean biologist Verela and a host of other scholars from virtually every parts of the academy note the paucity of a strictly intellectual epistemology and the lack of embodied, somatic knowing in the academy.

(slide 86)The chief good that a studio art program offers the academy is in balancing percept with concept, acknowledging tacit as well as explicit knowing “telling the truth but tell it slant.” Studio art programs in the academy reinstate sensory perception alongside reasoned knowing. Making art exercises multiple ways of knowing—combining perceptual widening with philosophical inquiry, affect, and intellect, artwork emerging out of the interstices between them. The methodology of the studio reanimates sight, reclaims active receptivity, rebalancing the Cartesian reframing of vision and enacts this vital remembering.

(slide 87) A Stop in art or life is an invitation to pause, not run or react, but be curious, hold the liminal moment; open a space of inquiry, trust unknowingness. Insight arrives during the active practice of making with a burst of energy and sometimes a laugh of knowing what was previously a mystery. Studio programs teach this methodology intentionally, embed attentiveness structurally, require this pattern of listening that might otherwise be called prayer.

Both art-making and narrative can be named “a living inquiry... the work of the heart, the work of our hands, our sense-making body, our many-toned voices” fruit of the wine, work of human hands it is our spiritual offering and cannot be separated from the academic task. The research methodology of the studio does not hone “knowing” to one sharp point, but celebrates connecting with rhizomatic complexity the cascading possibilities that open. We are indeed alive in our own skins; attending to what matters—to the heart pulsing, the narratives coursing through our veins, our longing as yet unknown released through art-making, calls us to wide-awakeness; is key to unleashing energy to fuel our making, and key to inviting the Spirit to infuse the academic task.