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# Art as Inquiry: A Book Review of Being with A/r/tography

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## Art as Inquiry: A Book Review of Being with A/r/tography

### **Abstract**

In this essay, the edited anthology, *Being with A/r/tography* (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) is reviewed in regard to its relevance to visual arts research. Art is presented as a method of inquiry as theory, dialogue, and a/r/tographic works are shared within a community of practicing arts-based researchers. This text offers insight into the possibilities of the arts as active and perceptive modes of inquiry.

### **Keywords**

Visual Arts, Qualitative Research, and Inquiry

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## **Art as Inquiry: A Book Review of Being with A/r/tography**

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*In this essay, the edited anthology, *Being with A/r/tography* (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) is reviewed in regard to its relevance to visual arts research. Art is presented as a method of inquiry as theory, dialogue, and a/r/tographic works are shared within a community of practicing arts-based researchers. This text offers insight into the possibilities of the arts as active and perceptive modes of inquiry. Key Words: Visual Arts, Qualitative Research, and Inquiry*

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In the midst of planning and justifying an arts-based dissertation, I came upon *Being with A/r/tography* (Springgay, Irwin, Leggo, & Gouzouasis, 2008) in search of alternative research methodologies. This text opens a door into a community of practicing artist-researcher-teachers who embody inquiry within daily living, in turn stimulating readers to consider how they might contribute to the dialogue and seek to know through art. The editors choose to adopt the term “conceptual practices” (p. xxvii) to describe the possibilities, characteristics, and affordances of a/r/tography in order to escape traditional notions of methods. In this book review, I will approach the text as a framework for thinking about the possibilities of visual art as inquiry. I will begin by summarizing the theoretical foundations of a/r/tography and the conceptual practices shared among a/r/tographers. This will lead into a synopsis of examples of a/r/tographic inquiry and the challenges facing a/r/tographers. I will conclude with a discussion about the possibilities of a/r/tography within the field of qualitative research.

### **What is A/r/tography?**

The term a/r/tography was created to signify the multiple roles played in arts-based research: artist-researcher-teacher. Practice-based underpinnings focus on how “theorizing through inquiry seeks understanding by way of an evolution of questions within the living-inquiry processes of the practitioner” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxii). The practices of artists and educators are considered to be forms of research and the “intellectual, imaginative, and insightful work” they create is “grounded in ongoing forms of recursive and reflexive inquiry engaged in theorizing for understanding” (p. xxii).

Irwin and Springgay (2008) emphasize a kind of understanding that is relational, embodied and active. A/r/tographic researchers draw upon personal experiences as they work through the arts to question, ponder and theorize new questions and possibilities. The art-making processes are seen as acts of research and are grounded in writing. This focus on the relationship between creating art and writing promotes new ways of understand the world through experience. Three ways of interpreting experience, theoria

(knowing), praxis (doing), and poesis (making) are folded together in a/r/tography to create spaces in which meaning is “interrogated and ruptured” (p. xx).

Irwin and Springgay (2008) also describe the role of communities of practice in a/r/tographic research. Inquiry is conceived of as social, although many may assume self-indulgence drives many artistic endeavors. All works are related to the works of others, and a/r/tographers recognize other works as they document their own work. This allows a community of practicing researchers to better understand bodies of literature within and across multiple fields. Through embodied art making and writing, a/r/tographers explore phenomena through concepts rather than specific methods. This means focusing on the processes of constructing new knowledge, rather than following the specific criteria of an established research methodology. Irwin and Springgay “interpret concepts to be flexible intersubjective locations through which close analysis renders new understandings and meanings” (p. xxviii). In keeping with these interpretations, Irwin and Springgay adopt the term “renderings” to describe six concepts that assist a/r/tographers as they share their work with others. Readers are reminded that although it may seem routine to label these renderings as criteria for a/r/tographic work, they are meant to represent a variety of possibilities. The following section will present a description of each of the six renderings.

### **A/r/tographic Renderings**

#### *Contiguity*

This rendering represents the a/r/tographer’s understandings of the adjacent and interconnected identities of artist, teacher, and researcher. Contiguity is also found in the relationship between “the artform and writing with, in or about the phenomenon...[and] contiguity is found in the act of double imaging between art as an activity or product and a/r/t as a symbolic representation of the three constituent identities” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxvii). This positions a/r/tographers within in-between spaces—places located in the folds of multiple identities—placing them in relation to others through their questions, experiences, and understandings. Therefore, a/r/tographers cite and situate their work within larger conversations among artists, teachers, and researchers.

#### *Living inquiry*

A/r/tography is a way being in the world in which an individual positions herself in relation to others through constant reflection, contemplation, and theorizing that is explored through art, research, and teaching. As a methodology, it is one of embodiment that requires one to both trouble and delight in meaning, as practice is lived through a life of inquiry in relation to the roles associated with the researcher’s numerous identities. Irwin and Springgay (2008) explain, “rigour comes from its continuous reflective and reflexive stance to engagement, analysis, and learning” (p. xxix). This can include any traditional qualitative data forms, as well as visual, musical, and/or textual works of art.

*Metaphor/metonymy*

Irwin and Springgay (2008) explain that humans make sense of the world through the use of metaphors and metonyms. Through metaphors we make connections between the new and the known, and through metonyms we understand through replacement and intimate associations. As artists make connections between their thinking, ideas and experiences, they utilize their senses as meaning is deconstructed, reconstructed, or neither. When artists are positioned to grasp for meaning, they struggle to understand, but new awareness occurs throughout these slippery processes.

*Openings*

The advantage of this a/r/tographic rendering is to stimulate dialogue among communities of practice as opposed to reporting to readers what the artist has learned. The purpose of a/r/tographic works is to raise new questions as the artist confronts “what is seen and known and what is not seen and known” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx). A/r/t in this sense is not created to report findings, but to involve readers in co-constructive processes where “meanings are negotiated by, with, and among a/r/tographers as well as with their audiences” (p. xxx).

*Reverberations*

The reverberation rendering refers to the movements that materialize within and from a/r/tographic works. Reverberations may be striking or faint, but they always demand that a/r/tographers rethink their understandings about the phenomenon. These movements lead a/r/tographers “deeper into meanings or they shift us toward a slippage of meaning” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx). Despite the directionality of these movements, a/r/tographers are pushed towards new openings and possibilities.

*Excess*

A/r/tographic practices are intended to be provocative, often leading to transformations. These transformations stem from excess, “which is created when control and regulation disappear and we grapple with what lies outside the acceptable” (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xxx). Stepping outside of tradition and prescribed methodologies leads one to consider the phenomena from the embodied perspectives of artist-researcher-teacher, providing “opportunities for complexifying the simple and simplifying the complex by questioning how things come into being and the nature of their being” (p. xxx).

**Experiences with A/r/tography**

The book is organized into four parts: Self-Study and Autobiography, Communities of A/r/tographic practice, Ethics and Activism, and Further Openings. Readers are introduced to each section by an essay written by one of the editors to lay the foundations for each of the four themes. This allows the editors to address what it means

to study the self through art within communities of practice guided by an ethics of embodiment as a/r/tographers seek to validate their work as legitimate research. The work of practicing a/r/tographers is beautifully blended within each section, providing readers with living examples in which meaning and traditional findings are complicated, bringing to light questions and experiences that have been unasked or overlooked. Carl Leggo (2008) describes the value of studying oneself by “suggesting that by thinking about [one’s] own life [s/he] can enter into the lived experiences of others, all of [them] engaging in conversations that contribute to the constitution of understanding and connection” (p. 12). Leggo explores the self through poetry, and Renee Norman (2008) integrates narrative writing within her poetic work. Anniina Suominen-Guyas (2008) uses photography to better understand herself, recognizing that “our individual goals and purposes are always inherently personal and private as well as sociopolitical, philosophical, pedagogical, and public” (p. 31).

Rita Irwin (2008) describes the social aspects of self-exploration within communities of practice as groups of a/r/tographers committed to living inquiry as a way of being in the world. These persons also share a commitment to “trouble and address difference” (p. 78) by re-imagining what it means to live together in difference. Similarly, Barbara Bickel (2008) recognizes that “the power of working and practicing within community is that we are taken outside of ourselves through the interrelational connections that develop” (p. 90). This sense of relationality and individuality is evident across the a/r/tographic work included in the text as a/r/tographers explore a variety of artistic media. Stephanie Springgay (2008) also explains that exploring the self in relation to others promotes ethical research.

When research is centered around bodied encounters, a/r/tographers practice inquiry that shifts away from knowing the Other towards the “perspective of being-with” the Other (Springgay, 2008, p. 156). Darlene Swanson (2008) speaks about her a/r/tographic experiences from a post-colonial perspective as she troubles her own tendencies to “[establish] ‘the problem’ from outside...from a place out there that can speak unmonitored by its own surveillance...” (p. 184). Throughout the text, a/r/tographers demonstrate an ethics of embodiment as they trouble what is known about the Other and how it is known, leading to Peter Gouzouais’ (2008) discussions about assessment, validity, and interpretation.

Through his personal experiences in validating and justifying his a/r/tographic work, Gouzouais (2008) explains that a/r/tography recognizes multiple perspectives, the limits of data and fact, as well as doubts about a singular reality. For a/r/tographers, these recognitions “[enable] a new beginning—an opening and invitation to revealing and understanding (Verstehen) as epistemology...” (p. 229). In opposition to generalizable results, a/r/tographic research is grounded upon interpretation, understanding, and opportunities found in misunderstanding.

### **A/r/tography and Qualitative Research**

A/r/tography offers researchers embodied methodologies through which the known can be explored through the processes of creating art. Springgay (2008) differentiates between arts-based methodologies that focus on the end result or representation, and a/r/tography that is “concerned with inquiry—the mode of searching,

questing, and probing—insisting that these elements be informed by and through the arts” (p. 159). For researchers who are interested in how they come to understand through the arts, *a/r/tography* offers a methodological framework for thinking about art as inquiry. In my own research, I am interested in how specific phenomena within the fields of visual arts and literacy might be understood through embodied perspectives. I invite those with interests in the arts and qualitative research to “get to know” *a/r/tography* and explore its possibilities.

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