

# Toward a Poor Exhibition: The Fail(lure) of *Curare* and *Currere*

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“...this shift in curator identity is more than recognizing the roles curators play in creating exhibitions, the focus now includes asking why and how they make their art decisions and how it re-defines curatorial research.”

This article offers a look at a/r/tographic inquiry designed to interrogate curator fail(lures) in *Dress Stories*, an exhibition of 150 personal clothing objects rendered in the Cora Stafford Gallery at the University of North Texas from September 25-28, 2012. The article presents opportunities to linger with the four steps for experimenting with *currere*, outlined by William F. Pinar and Madeleine R. Grumet in *Toward a Poor Curriculum* (1976) to consider the benefits of allowing for uncertainty in curating the curriculum of my lived experiences. A poor exhibition allowed me to become lost so I might be found as a curator. A poor exhibition, stripped of the clothing that keeps me from seeing, helped me to see my curatorial failings in new ways even after the exhibition closed.

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Figure 1. Stripped from Seeing Photograph by David L. Leggett.

A poor curriculum is one stripped of its distractions. Stripped of video tape, audio tape, fancy books and buildings, values clarification and individualized instruction. Stripped of all the clothing we drape around ourselves to keep us from seeing. What am I naked? (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. vii).

### *Re-Viewing Curare*

**C**urate derives from the Latin *curare*; to care, to guard, or to protect. For the purposes of this article, reframing *curare* allows for reflection on failures in curating. O’Neil (2007) describes the curator as an artist, shaping exhibitions through the “manipulation of the environment, the lighting, the labels, the placement of other works of art” (O’Neil, 2007, p. 21).

Curators make art in the decision-making, the selecting, of what to keep and what to discard in exhibitions. But this shift in curator identity is more than recognizing the roles curators play in creating exhibitions, the focus now includes asking why and how they make their art decisions and how it re-defines curatorial research (Rivett-Carnac, 2007). Brenson (1998) asserts “the era of the curator has begun” (p. 16), and he challenges curators to disclose the decisions and conditions in which they curate, the doubts, emotions, and intellectual components that comprise the curatorial process. In other words, these turns in the curatorial are paths towards a stripped, or poor exhibition and opportunities to render the curatorial in generative ways. I never intended to make a poor quality exhibition, just a poor exhibition, allowing for the possibilities of doing more with less.

### *Being in A/r/tography*

A/r/tography invites deeply reflexive interpretations, uncertainties, and tensions residing in the spaces between and betwixt who we are and what we do in our practices as artists, researchers, and teachers. Irwin (2004) describes the double dashes in the writing of “a/r/tography” as a way of visioning the roles of artist, teacher, and researcher and as a way of uniting identities and practices in ways that surface tensioned possibilities in this methodology. In my research inquiry I explore and propose the adding of yet a letter and dash in the a/r/tography acronym to create another way to integrate the roles in my personal and professional life. Subsequently, I add a “c” for “curator” beside and between the slashes of “a/r/tography” to create another acronym “c/a/r/tography” where curator-artist-researcher and teacher identities converge and diverge, and may be mapped in my representations of self and practice (McCartney, 2014). It is these cartographies

of becoming and being I seek to render in creative ways.

### ***Failure to Thrive***

A/r/tography calls researchers to re-imagine their life histories and to re-present those histories in image, objects, reflections, interpretations, and actions. My life history maps my ways into motherhood. I realize that since the birth of my daughter, I have silenced and packed away much of my curator/artist/researcher/teacher identity. In 2003, my daughter, Elizabeth Ellis was born three months early, weighing only one pound, eleven ounces. I was not ready for her arrival. The day after she was born, the doctors warned me about the seriousness of her illness and the possibility of her having brain damage, physical disabilities, blindness, deafness, or worse, she might die. I listened to the doctors tell me I may lose her, and I packed their words down into a deep place where no one would see my fears or insecurities as a mother. I would not hear the doctors' cautions, nor could I prepare for the reality I may have to accept the possibility of her death. I remember the doctors repeatedly using the term "failure to thrive" as a possible result of her extreme prematurity. Would my daughter's failure to thrive become my failure as a mother? In this article devoted to notions of fail(lures), the word "failure" reverberated deep inside me. It still lingers and hurts all these years later.

Elizabeth spent seventy-seven days in the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit before she came home from the hospital on oxygen and monitors. The doctors advised me to quit my job and devote myself to the full-time care and treatment of my very sick child. For the first three months at home, I spent hours each week driving Elizabeth to her cardiologist, pulmonologist, optometrist, and pediatrician appointments. It was all I could do for her. I could not breastfeed her, I

could not hold her close without setting-off alarms, and I could not make her well. I no longer curated artworks in a museum; instead, I curated my daughter's treatment plan to help her heal. I thought about how I would collect the experience of her early arrival and tenuous beginnings; and I agonized about how I would perform as a parent and curator of a special needs child. This was my lived experience, the course I ran as a mother, curator, artist, researcher, and teacher.

### ***Re-Viewing Currere***

Curriculum derives from the Latin *currere*; to run, to run a course. "The course most broadly is our lives, in schools and out, and the running is our experience of our lives" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 18). Therefore *currere* is not fixed, it is in motion, and it is lived. Stinson (2008) suggests there are connections between curating and curriculum development, and that as educators, we curate curriculum rather than create it, selecting some elements and discarding others to create new ways of experiencing and seeing material. In *c/a/r/tography*, I seek to locate the similarities between *curare* and *currere*. What might it mean to "care for" and "run with" curricula as curator/artist/researcher/teacher? If curriculum is an autobiographical act, where educators bring their histories and values to their teaching, and pass that along to their students, then what might my autobiography mean to an art education where *curare* and *currere* are voiced? I am drawn to poststructuralism and opportunities to unpack my relationship to and understanding of the things I pack in my identity, curating, and teaching. In poststructuralist terms, unpacking allows for deep reflection, interrogation, and interpretation. Unpacking my identity requires I identify the roots and routes in the

mapping of my curator/artist/researcher/teacher self and my relationship to collecting and curating. I had to become vulnerable enough to unpack the reasons for my curating. As I unpacked my curatorial knowing, I realized I had to look backwards before I could look forwards, I had to deal with Elizabeth's early birth, and also the clutter, the messiness, and the obsessive collecting that shaped my curator beginnings and the ways I select and discard materials in my teaching, in other words, the ways I strip myself bare.

### ***Rooted in Context***

Contextualization has become especially pertinent to my a/r/tographic inquiry. "It then reconstructs the pathway to the present choice by digging back under the layers of one's biography to identify the encounters that led to it" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 46). As a curator, my biography has included work on over fifty exhibitions. I have lived the caring situated between and betwixt the borders of curating. While I included over 150 articles of clothing in the *Dress Stories* exhibition, for the purposes of this article, I only want to consider my prom dress as an example of my gendered performativity.

*As I consider how I do my curator identity and how I am done and undone in my curator identity, I wonder what are the repetitions of my performativity and curatorial gestures? What kinds of performances produce our identities? Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition of acts in the context of a body sustained over time. Just as one is not born a woman, one is not born a curator, one becomes a curator, and one becomes as curator/artist/researcher/teacher. I perform curating when I collect and*

*save my clothes. I perform curating when I select which clothes to exhibit and install. I perform curating when I attune to curatorial practices and procedures for mounting an exhibition. I also perform curating when I imagine alternate routes and ways of curating. I perform curating when I care for my dress stories. (Dress Stories, Exhibition Didactic, 2012)*

As I installed my prom dress in the *Dress Stories* exhibition, I performed curatorial tasks—fitting, steaming, stitching, shaping, and staging the dress based on my curatorial ways of knowing. As a curator, I cared for my prom dress, and I was running a course, but not a fail(lure) course. Not yet.



Figure 2. Stripping It Down Photograph by Blake Hampton.

### ***Running Currere's Course: The Regressive***

Pinar and Grumet (1976) offer four steps to running *currere's* course: the regressive, the progressive, the analysis, and the synthesis. The first step of the method of *currere* is the regressive, where "One returns to the past, to capture it as it was, and as it hovers over the present" (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 55). My prom dress was an artifact from my lived experience. I captured the past of my prom dress in words in the exhibition didactics.

*Prom dresses are a shared cultural import that so many women have in common. I wore the hot pink dress to my senior prom in 1989. This dress marks a rite of passage, between my childhood and adulthood. There is no doubt I wanted attention, perhaps in a different way by wearing this dress. At once the dress points to the gender trouble of being pretty in pink, but it also forces me to consider the prom as a performance, and the ways I enacted the taffeta that night. I have kept this dress all these years despite the fact it does not remind me of a magical night of first loves, first kisses, first dances, first times. (Dress Stories, Exhibition Didactic, 2012)*

Like many women, I felt I had to hold on to my prom dress, which I kept shoved in a storage tub in my garage. I knew it was an important purchase my parents made for me, and I felt compelled to keep it, even though my feelings towards the dress posed a dilemma for me. I do not wear the dress anymore, so why was I holding on to it so tightly? What might this article of clothing reveal about my identity as curator/artist/researcher/teacher as a concept, a text, an opening to undo my

identity? Could my performativity be reimagined? Could the meaning of the dress change?

### ***Running Currere's Course: The Progressive***

Pinar and Grumet (1976) posit the second step in the method of *currere*, the progressive asking readers, "Try to discern where your intellectual interests are going, the relation between these evolving interests and your private life, between these two and evolving historical conditions" (p. 59). I looked for tensions in the progressive in the *Dress Stories* exhibition. I considered how my intellectual interests and private life have progressed since 1989, when I embodied my prom dress. I never imagined as a teenager in taffeta, I would find myself opened into motherhood fourteen years later.

*These are not so much stories of dress and construction, but dress stories embodied in the construction of meaning. Dress stories become a methodological way into a/r/tography for me. The inquiry is a process, and not a product where understandings are more important than findings, and where getting found means getting lost. I seek opportunities to get lost within my own wardrobe, as a cabinet of new curiosity, where tensions allow me to think about curating in meaningful ways as an art educator. (Dress Stories, Exhibition Didactic, 2012)*

How might my prom dress serve as means to getting lost and found? Pinar and Grumet (1976) ask, "How is the future present in the past, the past in the future, and the present in both?" (p. 60). This dress from my past was suddenly woven into my present future. I could have never predicted the ways I would find new meaning in my prom dress when I

was planning the exhibition. It would become a metonym and metaphor for grief and loss. The day the *Dress Stories* exhibition opened to the public, the gallery flooded. Threads of my past, present, and future unraveled in my institutional life as a curator. I remembered being terrified of the water as I assessed the damage to the exhibition and to the objects I continue to care for. Fluid leaked from openings in the gallery ceiling onto my collections of clothing. Garments I had spent hours dressing, styling, and carefully placing in the exhibition, were now wet, undressed, and undone. The exhibition was closed for two days of clean-up and repair. Tour groups were canceled, and visitors were turned away. The *Dress Stories* exhibition was only open to the public a total of thirteen hours, making it ephemeral and even more relational. It was not until I had de-installed the exhibition, I realized I had failed to find the fail(lure) in the gallery openings and closings.

### ***Running Currere's Course: The Analytical***

Pinar and Grumet (1976) describe the third step of the method of *currere* as analytical, asking readers to analyze the biographic present, exclusive of the past and future, but inclusive of responses to them. I thought about Elizabeth. The water came, and my clothes were wet. Something went wrong and my daughter came early. Water and amniotic fluid were seeping and leaking out of my openings. I was scared. "There's something about the rush of fluid out of the womb that creates a feeling of great helplessness: there's nothing you can do to stop it while it happens, and nothing you can do to put it back. All you can do is wait and hope." (Linden, Paroli, & Doron, 2000, p. 19). I waited and hoped while Elizabeth was in the NICU, recovering from her extreme prematurity. The doctors told me I had suffered from premature rupture of the

membranes, the medical term for my water breaking early (Linden, Paroli, & Doron, 2000, p. 19). It was not until the *Dress Stories* exhibition was over, and I was working on the writing of my dissertation, I learned the acronym for premature rupture of the membranes is P.R.O.M. I had failed to weave that connection together in the exhibition. I had failed to make the connection between Elizabeth's birth story and my prom dress story. The prom dress I included in the exhibition took on new meaning for me as a curator. Suddenly through metaphors and membranes I could see new possibilities to stitch, weave, and knot my narratives and transformations in a creative way, where my prom dress might become bricolage and a borderland for re-considering and re-creating curating.



Figure 3. What Does This Say About Me? Photograph by Blake Hampton.

I know the flood in the gallery was not my fault, but I had failed to care for and protect my exhibition in the present, just as my body had failed to care for and protect Elizabeth causing her early birth in my past. How might my failures as curator and mother provide opportunities for reconsidering failure, reconsidering caring, and reconsidering uncertainty in art education in the future? How could I make sense of my past, present, future, and put it all together?

***Running Currere’s Course: The Synthesis***

Pinar and Grumet (1976) offer a fourth step in the method of *currere*, synthesis, where pieces are made whole, where “I am placed together” (p. 61). “What is essential to *currere* is the assertion that *new structures evolve in the process of naming old ones*,” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. 115). I was already pointing towards a

kind of synthesis in the exhibition when I hung six vintage hand mirrors next to my prom dress. Vinyl lettering on the mirrors invited viewers to participate in the exhibition asking, “What does this say about me?” Visitors who looked into the mirrors saw themselves reflected back. They saw my clothes, but they also saw their clothes, themselves embodied in the mirrors on the exhibition walls as well.

I continued seeking new ways into *curare* and *currere* within the curatorial. The *Dress Stories* exhibition occurred in the middle of the inquiry process. Interestingly, the exhibition did not mark the end of the journey, and it continues even now to inform and shape my ways of knowing in rhizomatic ways. Irwin, Beer, Springgay and Grauer (2006) describe rhizomes as interstitial spaces with no beginnings or endings, but as always becoming, as being open to transformations, where rhizomes

create interconnected networks with multiple entry points. My prom dress offered multiple entry points for my stories of self and multiple renderings of my experiences. The dress did not have the same meaning for me as a curator after the flood. It no longer fit the same way in my narrative. Pinar and Grumet invite readers, “To let go of you. To let go of *currere*” (p. 176). Curators traditionally hold on to objects. But I wondered, what would it mean for me to let go of my prom dress?

### ***Rupturing the Membranes***

My curating was shaped by the work of Sandra Weber and Claudia Mitchell (2004a & 2004b), where dress as a methodology allows for spaces to consider narrative, identity, and practice, and to be altered by these spaces. Jo Visser (2004) considered whether she should sell her wedding dress, or transform it, before she nailed it to the wall. For years, I had dwelled in-between my curriculum, collecting, caring, and the possibilities of releasing my failures as a curator. In synthesis, I decided like Visser (2004) to render my prom dress in a new way. Pinar and Grumet (1976) caution readers, “This word ‘alternation’ must be understood not to mean simply, say, lengthening one’s trousers; no, it means more than external rearrangement. It involves a change in the fabric as well” (p. 15). I wrestled with how something new might be rendered in an artful form.

I put my prom dress on a dress form on my kitchen table. I paused. I closed my eyes and paid attention to my breathing. I took a pair of scissors, and wholly unlike a curator, charged with caring for objects, with protecting their collections, I began to physically loosen the stitches, the membranes of my prom dress. I started slowly, and the more I thought about my P.R.O.M., the gallery flooding, and my own lived experience the more furiously I cut,

and cut, and cut. Threads and seams came undone. The dress could no longer hold its shape. It would no longer fit anyone I might save it for. I was reconceptualizing my prom dress physically and metaphorically. The membranes of my dress were gone, the borders were no longer clear. I changed the terrain of my material, making my failures real and different.

Altering my prom dress membranes was not a premature rupture, but a rupture that had been delayed for over twenty years. If the exhibition gallery had literally not opened and flooded, I am not sure I would have gotten here. In the performative act of rupturing my corporality, my membranes again, I was able to release failure, release blame, release shame, and to begin to let go. And when I was done, I discarded the dress. I no longer need to possess it in order to care for it, in order to see I was forever altered by it. “More deeply, now, in the present, I choose what of it to honor, what of it to let go. I choose again who it is I aspire to be, how I wish my life history to read” (Pinar & Grumet, 1976, p. ix).





Figure 6. Rupturing the Membranes Photographs by  
Laura Lee McCartney.

### ***Toward a Poor Exhibition***

Altering my prom dress re-turned me towards a poor exhibition. Once I had discarded my prom dress, I provoked the ways I might have experimented with *curare* and *currere* more deeply. When the gallery flooded, campus work crews moved the dress forms and clothing out of the direct line of water seeping through the gallery ceiling. They shoved platforms aside and undressed the garments from their forms. The exhibit was actually stripped of

clothing. It was altered. When I arrived to survey the damage, I felt it was my curatorial responsibility to work to return everything back to the way it was designed, to recreate the exhibition before visitors could return to the gallery space. As a curator, I felt compelled to re-install the exhibition and myself. I was distracted by the damage. But now, I wish I hadn't fixed the exhibition. How might the visitors have reconsidered the exhibition and the curatorial if I had left clothing disheveled and undone? What if I had allowed visitors to run the course and fully experience the exhibition after the flood? Would the experience have been different if I had left the pools of water on the gallery floor? Could visitors have experienced the flood in community with me and beside me? That would have been a fail(lure), the lure of the curatorial fail which might have been transformative. I failed to see the a/r/togographical opportunity, where the process is more significant than the product. Was that a failure to thrive? Visitors to the exhibition would not deem the exhibition a failure, nor would the university, the sponsors, or my research committee. But, I did not allow others into all of the relational spaces of my lived experience of *curare* and *currere*, and that was a failure on my part.

FAILURE



Figure 7. The Lure of the Curatorial Fail Photograph by Blake Hampton.



Figure 8. Toward a Poor Exhibition Photograph by Laura Lee McCartney.

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